OUR OWN St. RITA

REV. M. J. CORCORAN, O.S.A.

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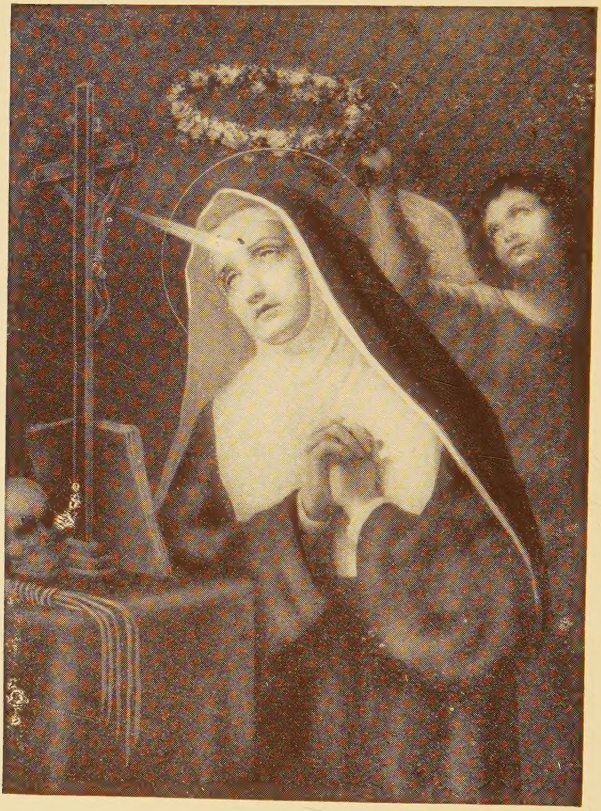

ST. RITA

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Our Own St. Rita

A LIFE OF THE SAINT OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

By
REV. M. J. CORCORAN, O.S.A.

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Archbishop of New York.

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TO THE

VERY REV. CHARLES M. DRISCOLL, O.S.A.,

OF ST. RITA'S, PHILADELPHIA,

IN TOKEN OF AFFECTIONATE ESTEEM,

THIS VOLUME IS

DEDICATED

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INTRODUCTION

CAN it be possible that our love for the Saints of the Church is dead? Is it true that the complexity of modern living, the thousand and one interests that beckon us and call, that smile upon us and cajole us, leave us with but slight relish for the deeper, better and nobler qualities of great living? Will we admit that while vicious living has a thousand separate faces that attract and hold, virtue has but a single repellent star-clear coldness, which moves us perhaps to venerate, but certainly not to love, its strength and perfect beauty? Will we grant that wickedness produces more varying types in human character than goodness, or qualities more interesting? Are the calm figures that stand so still and quiet in their places over the altars, holding in their thin hands forever and forever the Crucifix of the Lord, or with tireless, unwearied eyes of Infinite Desire look without ceasing to the heavens above—are the statues of the Saints our only conception of them? But

we cannot love a "plaster saint." Or is it possible that we formulate our thoughts of the Saints in terms of pinchbeck Puritanism, and that we would have them bloodless, spineless, weak-kneed, ignorant egotists, in whom the milk of human kindness was dried up whilst they searched for the ever-living waters?

Yet if we know not the Saints, how shall we love them? If their life has not its real meaning for us, how shall we appreciate it? If we be expert, keen and alive in the sciences, the arts or in business, but have little knowledge, less care and no regard concerning the lives of the Saints, we may as well frankly admit that with those outside the Church who do not think we are in perfect accord in denying value to sanctity. Then our love for the Saints is dead.

But it is not true that vice—the shadow of virtue—has subtler means of showing itself to appreciative minds than virtue; it is not true that the Saints, who embodied in themselves the choicest virtues, were repellent in an utter aloofness or a self-conscious stupid egotism; it is not true that they were

fools, nor that they were ignorant fanatics. What is true is this. They were the energetic men and women—the dynamos of irresistible, all-absorbing energy which flooded subsequent epochs in its forceful power. Each of them was a figure in his own time, standing for the best things of his day. They were the heroines and the heroes of their Century and they differed from their counterparts in the history of merely secular activity in one particular. Whilst the hero was venerated best by those that knew him least, the Saint was venerated and loved best by those that knew him most intimately. And after all complete knowledge is better knowledge. The character that improves with one's acquaintance is nobler than that which loses by each step that draws us nearer to it. A Napoleon, with the charm of genius that led tens of thousands into the jaws of death in his name, was but a sorry figure to those that knew intimately his egotism, his blind vanity, his disregard of the pledged word, his unbridled lust; whilst a Francis de Sales, who likewise by the sheer strength of genius stirred the hearts of thousands, was

esteemed the more deeply, loved the more dearly and admired the more thoroughly by those whose privilege it was to see at close range his justice and his courage, his self-denial and his sweetness. In other words, the full measure of manhood in the Saint is to be discovered only by a close study of his life. But how frequently do we fail in a proper appreciation of their strength and their power!

And yet no people is more appreciative of true worth in men or women, be they outside the fold or within it, than our own Catholic people. We refuse to be deceived by shams or hypocrisy, and when we find real worth we are ready to stand in the forefront of those that recognize it and do homage unto it. And who can be more worthy of our homage and of our devotion than the Saints? The noblest part of our lives is that part which consciously or unconsciously we live as Catholics. The happiest moments are those moments that we spend as children of the Church.

Yet when one speaks to us of Saints and of sanctity, when one draws to our attention

the work that they have done in God's own Name we are too ready to ascribe, with our non-Catholic friends, the marvels that are recounted of them to the dreamings of unworldly and ignorant biographers, or to take it for granted that they lived, these heroes of the Church, in conditions so far different from our own that their life can be to us nothing of inspiration, of confidence, of strength and of example. Can anything be more false? They were men and women, born of the same flesh and blood as we are, liable to precisely the same trials and difficulties; burdened with the same crosses; knowing the same joys and sorrows; men and women of their day as we are men and women of our own. To them were given the same Sacraments, for them the same infallible teaching voice spoke, upon them were showered the same graces and benedictions which we have received. They were not all of them priests or bishops, popes or kings. They were not all of them mere striplings. They were not all of them products of Catholic homes and of Catholic parents. In fact, it is to be noted that the great lists of the

heroes of the Church are made up from every path of life, from every age, from all conditions and from both sexes. Sanctity has found no more shining marks amongst the devout female sex than it has amongst men, nor has it found frailer hearts amongst girls than it has laid bare to us in the ranks of Christian soldiers. Since this is true, should we hesitate any longer to give to our own, to those that are bound to us by a thousand ties, the bonds of the same faith, of the same hope and the same type of love towards God, the bond of the same tabernacle, the same baptism, the same penance, the same fasts, the same feasts, the same sorrows, the same joys and the same promises of victory —why should we hesitate to give to them the real measure of our acknowledgment of their worth? We admire nobility in thought, fearlessness in speech, uprightness in action. We admire a unity of purpose, consistency in life, exalted standards. We admire an unflinching willingness to suffer that others may be helped, courage which permits no circumstances to alter or weaken the directness of its desires. And where in the his-

tory of men shall we find those qualities in greater degree than in the Saints of the Catholic Church? Their lives were lives of nobility, raised to the highest degree.

They were great men and women not only for the generations that were to follow in their footsteps, they were great even to the men and women of their own time, and greatest to those who knew them best. If I may be permitted to speak of those I love best, what shall I say of the whole-hearted strength of an Augustine, the mildness and absolute sincerity of a Clare of Montefalco, the kindness of a Saint Thomas of Villanova in his open-handed, unbounded generosity toward the poor of Christ, the singleness of purpose of a Nicholas of Tolentino? Qualities of mind and soul which, if employed in the uses of the world, would have merited for them our esteem, our love and our honor, are marks which in their sainthood we choose to forget and to ignore. And if it be true that we who are foremost in our veneration for greatness in men should be likewise interested in greatness of all the Saints in the Catholic Church, it is likewise

true that to each of us certain Saints have their own particular appeal. To those that are devoted to the souls of the dead—Saint Nicholas of Tolentino; to those that cultivate an especial love for the poor of the flock, the halt, the lame and the blind—Saint Thomas of Villanova; to those whose paths are midst the hallowed dead, whose memory books preserve—Saint Augustine; and to us all our own Blessed Mother. We know so little about her, and yet anything that could be written would fall short of that which should be said.

But amongst the Saints of the Church whose memory is enshrined in the hearts of many Saint Rita stands supreme. It would be difficult to explain why so many love her with the devotion that is hers. No organized propaganda, no immense resources, no strong publications, no effort concentrated simply to that end; and yet I dare say there is no Saint in the history of the Church who has been so long thoroughly forgotten and so splendidly remembered once her name was emblazoned on the catalogue of the Saints. She died in 1457 and was

canonized only in 1900. During the years that have gone one might say that she was forgotten. It is true that a few loyal hearts, either because of religious profession in the Augustinian Order or because of their nearness to her country and to her home, did remember her. But how few they were! But since her canonization the name of Rita has been a name to conjure with. It has spread through the four quarters of the globe and is as well known in South America as it is in China, in Chicago as it is in Rome, in San Francisco as it is in New York. Nor is devotion to her limited only to young men and young women, to cloistered nuns or to the mothers of families. There seems to be no state in which one may not find adherents of the cause of Rita. Perhaps it is that she can claim the title of "The Saint of the Commonplace," and that her life, passed as it was, hidden from the eyes of men in the modest home in Roccaporena and in the cloister of the Augustinian nuns at Cascia, worked out so perfectly the problems which we, ordinary mortals in an ordinary life, must deal with and solve. She left no

record in books, she founded no splendid monastery, she was not the head of a Religious Order, nor even of the convent in which she lived and died. She worked no miracles of universal renown during her lifetime, nor was it granted her to be the counsellor or the ambassador of prelate or pope. She did not shed her blood in defense of the Faith or in the preservation of her virginity. She does not stand forth as the mother of great sons, nor was she a queen in her own country. But the recompense that God in His goodness deigned to give unto the measure of her life—nothing less than the miraculous preservation of her body in the convent in Cascia—has drawn attention to the fact that that life, commonplace, drab and darkened by deep sorrow and by the affliction that almost every human heart may know, was filled with a measure of goodness far beyond the average. Perhaps it is for this reason that Saint Rita is loved; because she had fulfilled the great purpose of noble living, of simple desires and of intense realization of God's working in men's hearts.

We have ventured therefore to bring be-

fore the reader a new tale with a very old theme. The inspiration of these lines is contained rather in the recent volume of Father Marabottini in Italian than in any other of the lives of St. Rita in Spanish, Italian or English which have been consulted. We hope that the reading of our little work may hearten those who know St. Rita, who have invoked her and have not invoked in vain, to love her more fervently and to call upon her more earnestly. We hope, too, that those who do not know her may be brought by means of these simple pages to know and to love the Saint whom a people's faith has named "The Saint of the Impossible."

CHAPTER I

UMBRIA; RITA'S EARLY YEARS

UMBRIA rests in the very heart of Italy. At no place do her boundaries touch the sea on either side; on the north and east, the Marches and the Abruzzi; on the west and south, Tuscany and Rome shelter her from the Adriatic on the one hand and the Mediterranean on the other. In centuries gone by, before Rome became great, the Umbrians were masters of all central Italy. After repeated defeats and uncounted misfortunes this brave people made itself secure on the mountain-sides and deep valleys of the central Apennines, lending aid to the Romans in one of the fiercest battles of the war with Carthage—that of Lake Trasimeno. To Rome she has always turned, and from Rome has she received her strength. Scarce twenty miles up along the Tiber from The City is her nearest boundary. A little more than a hundred miles along the same river is her capital city, Perugia.

And until 1860 her lands were amongst the territories of the Pope, and her people loyal to him as their Prince and Ruler. That heart of Italy remained true to its sovereign, though traitors supported by foreign gold and abetted by foreign governments put to an end the centuries of prosperity with which God had blessed that loyalty.

If it be true, as some allege, that the name of Umbria was taken from the Latin word "umbra," which means shadow or shade, the name is well chosen. As you travel from the treeless plains of the Roman Campagna to the mountains, your fellow passenger will point out Umbria with its shady forests on the mountain-sides, in the valleys and along the sloping plains. In these forests lords and ladies in the olden times hunted the fiercest wild boars in the entire Peninsula, and today the forests, old and young, earn for the Province the title of "Umbria forever green."

The central Apennines, the backbone of Italy, stretch through the Province from north to south, raising up their lofty peaks, ridge after ridge, and hiding in their shaded

valleys boisterous mountain torrents. On their flanks are rolling hills, made beautiful by the silvery olive groves and a thousand vineyards and orchards. And from the foot-hills sweep the broad plains, stretching forth to far-off horizons. The country-side is made fertile with many rivers, none of which we would call very big. There are the Tiber, not yellow and sluggish as it is at Rome, but clear and rapid, as befits the mountains that give it life, the Neva, the Paglia, and the Velino, which at Terni forms one of the most picturesque of the Italian waterfalls. And then there are the lakes, and especially those of Piediluco and Colfiorito—two perfect limpid diamonds in a setting of green.

Man through art has done his best to make more impressive the beauty with which God had adorned Umbria. The Cathedral of Orvieto is one of the marvels of Gothic; the Cathedrals of Assisi have been rightly called "the most sublime product of Italian genius under the inspiration of Christian faith." The hospitals at Perugia, the Palace of the Consuls in Gubbio, which can compare in beauty with the Palace of the Signoria in

Florence, a model in municipal architecture; Spoleto, Rieti, Foligno, every city in the Province, in fact, can be proud of its masterpieces. In the fine arts Umbria had its own school of painting; every city and town, every village and hamlet, could point out in the town hall or in the parish churches the works of skill of its own townsmen, masters in days when long years of training and a gift of genius in line and color alone would earn for one the right to the name. And their paintings with backgrounds in gold, the Madonnas, the pictures of the Saints, the landscapes, all breathe peace and sweetness. Their canvasses, warm with light or shaded in darkness, or again tinted in the gossamer-like violet or opal, are always beautiful, always gentle, always devotional. The history of the painters is proud of the Umbrian masters, of Oderisi, whom the Immortal Dante names in his great work; of Perugino, teacher of the divine Raffaele; and of Nelli, whose paintings of Our Lady breathe sweet gentleness and delicate taste. Unlike many peoples, the Umbrians have known not only how to appreciate the beauty

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of their land, but what is infinitely better, they have proved themselves capable of enriching that beauty by returning to the Creator of all loveliness thanks for His bounty,—in dedicating their noblest efforts to the glory of His Name.

But the spirit of religious faith, which made a land thrice beautiful in the power it gave the people to appreciate the value of beauty, has ever flourished in Umbria. When the Provisional Government, ten years before the modern unification of Italy, wiped out of existence the monasteries of men and the convents of nuns, the decree of suppression emptied almost two hundred monasteries and half as many convents and swept from their houses more than four thousand souls dedicated to Christ's service. Even at that the scientific legal robbery was not thorough, for some convents were left untouched. We can scarcely understand how men in good faith could commit such an unwarrantable deed. We simply pass over the act in a spirit of charity, taking occasion to note that the numbers are not small, a fact that is more striking when we remember

that in the Province there were not half a million souls.

Conditions in the ages of Faith can be imagined rather than described. It will be sufficient to recall two great Umbrians who stand for the noblest and best in the religious life of the Catholic Church, two men that the whole world knows and admires,—Benedict of Norcia and Francis of Assisi. To the one the Benedictines owe their name, their spirit and their Rule; the Church, its swift development amongst the pagans from the North that overran in successive waves the Christian world in Western Europe; humanity, the preservation of the Latin classics and Latin culture. To the other our human nature in its drab moments calls—for the joy of living, the happiness and the mirth of the never-ending spring-time of life. For Francis is the miracle of Love; his efforts at social reform are an index not only of the needs of his time, but of the most effective means to meet those needs. His Order takes its place in the Four Orders of the Church, his songs of praise and the romance of his life, with its passionate love for all God's

creatures, are as readily understood by those outside the Church as by those within it, and at times one would be led to believe—even more so. Again, if we may strike a minor key, there is the name of a follower of Francis, the writer of the Stabat Mater which we sing in the church during the Lenten time, Jacopone da Todi, and the two Augustinians—Gentile da Foligno and Simon Fidati of Cascia. To them the literature of Italy is deeply indebted, for their works are amongst the best of the thirteenth, the greatest of centuries. And though these names stand out with greatest prominence, still there are many more—men and women of holiness of life, lofty idealism and unswerving purpose that graced the life of the Province in this and other centuries—Clare of Assisi, follower of the lowly Francis, and another Clare from the neighboring village of Montefalco, an Augustinian nun.

Almost without intending it, I have carried the reader from the description of the geography of Umbria to a brief grouping of the beauties of that Province and of the conditions therein during the Thirteenth

and Fourteenth Centuries. I have sought to stretch the canvas for the design to be worked upon it that I might portray as best I can the features of one of the gentle and sweet daughters of Umbria, a follower of the great patriarch Saint Augustine, who rose up in this Province towards the close of the Fourteenth Century—a Saint whom Leo XIII, when he raised her to the honor of the altars, called "The Pearl Beyond Price of Umbria."

A person going from Rome toward the strong and gentle Abruzzi to the north and west meets rough and stalwart mountains and deep valleys, in whose depths tranquil little streams make their silent way. In this region of the mountains we should halt for a moment in developing our present tale, admiring the grace of God which in the midst of these deserted and mountainy places caused a flower to bloom whose perfume continues as a wave that was to be carried down over the Fourteenth Century even to our own times.

That century, it is true, is not one that does honor to the pages of history; register of its

records contains events that were most disastrous to the Church and society. Through the work of the hated king, Philip Le Belle, after thirteen centuries we see the Roman Pontiff taken far away from his own See and made a prisoner in Avignon. From this fact and from the political manoeuvres of intriguing emperors and ambitious cardinals there came forth the terrible schism of the Western Church, the parent of the greatest disorders, of uncounted evils and of consequences most sad. Faith in the courts and in the cities was, so to speak, drowned in evil living and in hypocrisy; heresies wended their way unchecked, like slimy serpents after a storm in spring; and civil wars, factions and revolts agitated society in many places. The common people, however, remained steadfast to the Faith, especially those that dwelt in villages and in places far from the centres of population.

Let us make our way to one of these villages, at the bottom of a pass in the mountains where the river Corno flows. Here there are only a few houses, sad-looking and desolate. The place is ringed about

with mountains, which keep from it for months the life-giving rays of the sun; and the houses, few in number and badly protected, were frequently demolished by the waters of Mechiglio, which in the rainy seasons gathered all the torrents that descend from the mountains. The inhabitants of this place are good, simple, clean-living country people and shepherds—and the name of the town is Roccaporena. Can we bridge the gap of the centuries that are gone and imagine clearly what the life of these people was? Time and distance—which are annihilated by the telephone, the telegraph, the automobile and the railways—meant much to them, whose only means of travel was afoot or on horseback; night and day—which are scarcely to be distinguished in our cities in the hot flame of our life, and the illumination, which a million electric lights give forth so freely—were very real words to them, whose illumination was the bright moon or the flickering lamp of olive oil. Motion pictures and theatres! An occasional procession in honor of the patron saint of the town, the fair in the fall of the year,

the miracle-players in the court-yard of the castle, perhaps a strolling player with bitter jest and light song. The newspaper! Dame Rumor took its place with stories little less true than those sometimes given to us with all the authority of a national news-gathering organization. But why continue? Not a single invention of the epoch we call modern was then even dreamt of—not even gunpowder. But we must not make the picture a negative one. Their homes in Roccaporena were of stone, one-storied, with floors of brick, a wide fireplace and chimney at the one side, a window at the other; the walls were coated with a heavy whitewash. From the rafters hung long rows of drying herbs and vegetables, figs and almonds in bags by the walls. Over the fire the large copper caldron hung from the crane arm. Everything was neat and clean—the homespun linens, the staunch copper bowls scrubbed each day with the sand from the brook, food the simplest, meat rarely in the month, exercise sharp and vigorous. And over all the Church, which understands the human heart

equally as well in the Twentieth Century as in the Fourteenth Century.

In this mountain village, toward the middle of the Fourteenth Century, there lived a man and wife who were poor in the world's goods but rich in every virtue. They were Antonio Mancini and Amata Ferri, and they made their living working their own garden and patch of ground and tending their herds, contented and trusting in the Providence of God. These good country people were called by their neighbors "The Peace-makers of Jesus Christ," because of the fact that wherever their attention was brought to a quarrel between two neighbors, and especially if it was a quarrel that bid fair to lead to murder, they hurried and like angels of peace tried every means to bring back cool thought and to obtain pardon for the offender. For the age was an age of blood. The fiery passions of the Umbrians were swift to vengeance; insult or wrong was seldom permitted to grow cold in long delay. The justice of the knife was the swiftest and sweetest justice, as the men of those days saw it; assassinations were frequent and as-

sassins escaped under the protection of kinsfolk and friends. But the Mancini did not need powerful argumentation, nor did they use long diplomatic discussions—the most Holy Name of Jesus, His pardon of those that crucified Him, the peace which He brought into the hearts of men—these were enough and were sufficient. And this work they did with so much gentleness and courtesy that no one could deny to the couple the sweet satisfaction of having yielded. Who can tell us what good these souls, simple and honest, accomplished in the name of God?

Antonio and Amata, however, advanced in years without being blessed with the gift of children. This they ardently longed for, but the hope went always farther from them, and the years passed rapidly with old age, making their fireside bare. As Antonio herded his flock of sheep and goats on the mountain-side, in the silence of the long summer day, he wondered why, when God was so prodigal to His creatures in blessings, that one favor should be denied him. And when occasionally he would raise in his

arms the tender lamb to wrap about it his cloak of woolly sheepskin that he might shelter the innocent creature against the cold blasts of the early night, his heart would beat faster at the thought of his own lambkin that was not his to fondle and caress. And he grieved for the sorrow of Amata. In the long hours that were spent with the neighbors by the flat stones in the brook, washing the linens of their poor household, she raised not her heart to sing the merry tunes of the women. Hers was the duty to be a second mother to the small children of the village, that prattled in the bright sunshine at the water's edge, or to those still smaller, bound tightly in swaddling clothes—so still, so quiet and so large-eyed—under the shadow of the olive branches. And she longed for a child of her own. As they sat at the wide fireside during the long winter evenings, the dancing flames from brushwood and log pictured to them both the gentle face and the tender hands of the gift that was not theirs to have but in fancy. And when Sunday came and the feast-days of the Saints, and they made

their way amidst the throng of their neighbors, leading the clear, sweet chant of the joyous litanies and hymns, to the vestibule of the church in Cascia, Amata, amidst the women and the girls on the Gospel side, would recall the aching heart of her husband who knelt amongst the men of the town over to the right. Her heart would ache at the thought of his desire. Resigned, but not losing hope, they continued to pray to the Lord that He should hear them. And in the same manner as in days gone by Sara, Anna and Elizabeth in their old age brought forth into the world Isaac, Samuel and John, the Precursor of the Lord, so now did Amata in Roccaporena become the mother of a child. She gave thanks from the bottom of her heart to the Lord, understanding as she did her own nothingness and His infinite goodness. From the very moment she knew that she was to become a mother she offered to God the child that was to be born to her, praying of Him to accept and to bless the gift which He had given her.

It was a night in the Maytime of 1381. Deep silence held solemn court over the

townland of Roccaporena, and the poor shepherds, wearied by the toil of the spring day, rested in slumber, when Rita came to her mother's home. Great was the joy of Antonio and Amata. All the long years of waiting had been for this happy night. And they thanked God for His bounty. When morning came the glad news was spread throughout the country-side; kinsfolk and friends hastened to offer their best wishes. For this was a child of promise! How many another infant on that night waked strong echoes in the heart of a parent with its first weak cries, in royal court and in princely family, amongst the noble, the strong and the powerful—and today they are forgotten, this child remembered! Their names are unspoken, this child's invoked by thousands of mothers and by thousands of children's voices. And her mother was mindful of the duty of Christian motherhood—the first duty. On the following Sunday the child was given that robe of innocence, our common heritage, our first gift from Christ's church, holy Baptism.

Amata in her home awaited the return of

the godparents that she might kiss with the first kiss of a Catholic mother the lips of her angel, newly born into a greater kingdom. Only a pen dipped in gold could picture the wonder of those moments. Only the singing hearts of happy mothers can read the hidden meaning of these lines. And as they placed the infant once more in her cradle, sleeping with parted lips in the slumber of childhood, a murmur was heard at the open doorway, and out of the May sunshine flitted the bees, circling and buzzing over the face of the child. In and out of the parted lips they darted, and then off again over the spring fields by the stream.

And after six centuries the wonder of Rita's bees still continues. In the monastery at Cascia, hidden in the ancient wall between the little cell of the Saint and the room where her body rests in its coffin, the bees still live and have lived from the day of Rita's death. These bees are more or less like the ordinary bee, if anything a trifle larger. They have no sting and their hum is different from that of other bees. They come out from the holes in the walls but

seldom, and that at the same times: during Holy Week and on Saint Rita's feast-day. They return at nightfall and close up their cells with a white veil of wax. Pope Urban VIII, who was devoted to Rita of Cascia, expressed the desire to see one of these bees. The Sisters caught one and sent it to the Pontiff in a small glass vial. He examined the insect and then released it, after tying about its body a small piece of the finest silk thread. The bee made the shortest way home, where it was welcomed by the Sisters, relieved of its unaccustomed burden and numbered once more with its companions near the body of the dear Saint. This fact is mentioned in passing and is part of the sworn testimony given in the so-called Process of the Saint, pages 680 and 683.

The cradle of Saint Rita had been wrapt about with the white light of a wondrous dawn, a secure sign of a morning brighter still. Here we find ourselves face to face with a gap in the history of her life which all the writers of the deeds of Rita leap over in a step from her birth to her girlhood. But knowing well the character of her parents,

and especially of her mother, it is easy for us to fill in that gap and to show how Amata sought to bring forth and to cultivate that little flower which had been transplanted from heaven into her household. When Rita began first to lisp, her words were the sweet names of Jesus and Mary, and forthwith her little hand, guided by her loving mother, made the sign of all Christians—the sign of the Cross. Beautiful indeed is the home-life of a Christian mother in those sublime moments in which she forms and nurtures the soul of her child, whilst nourishing the child in the blood of her heart. O Catholic mothers, how noble and holy is your calling in life!

And here our thoughts take flight from the valley of Roccaporena to the low, level land of Numidia to Tagaste. Let us enter into one of the houses there. We find everything in order, everything in its place. There is an atmosphere that breathes nobility and riches in former days. A young woman, on whose face one could read goodness and affection, holds close to her side a little child, who is about to join his hands

in prayer and who is looking with his eyes fixed—those eyes so intelligent and sparkling—on a picture his mother points out, beneath which is written the most holy name of Jesus. It is Monica, model of Christian mothers, the child is her own Augustine. And the child Rita grew amongst similar holy exercises, strengthened by the example of her parents, who were most devoted to the Passion of Our Lord. Often did they tell little Rita of the sufferings and of the agony which Jesus suffered for our sins, and she heard them in wonder, with her eyes sad at the thought of His sorrow. And in this way in her little heart, as upon the soft wax, there was impressed a tender love for the Crucified Lord whose passionate lover she was destined to become. To make more perfect this training in faith and love Amata and Antonio used to develop their child in good works, and especially in almsgiving to the poor of Christ Jesus that knocked at their door. And we are told that often Rita shared with them her food and gave up even the garments that covered her to companions more needy than herself.

In other things likewise her life was elevated on a plane that was above earth's level. Oftentimes one could see her, in the quiet of the evening, kneeling in loving prayer before the picture of Our Lady. And oft again before the altar of the Lord she knelt in silence, angel that she was, fit company for those angels that surrounded the throne of the Eucharistic Saviour. What a picture of faith and of innocence and of love it was to see this little child, wrapt in prayer, pouring out her soul with all the love of her heart to God! Who can describe the holy joy and the pure delight in the heart of Rita when in First Holy Communion she tasted how really sweet is the Lord, receiving Him in the Sacrament of His Love? We know it and can imagine the full measure of His wonder, we to whom the day was simply a Sunday, occurring between a school day called Friday and a school day called Monday, with the thousand and one distractions of new shoes, new suits, candles and ribbons, we to whom the day meant so much in spite of the thousand and one unnecessary distractions! But what must it

have meant to Rita in her poverty and simplicity? For in her heart on that day was born a sole desire to become a Sister. This she longed for with a burning, living ardor. And so she resolved and the resolution she held close to her heart, awaiting the time which should be opportune for asking her parents' consent. Ah! Rita, sweet child, long and hard was to be the time before your resolution should bear fruit in action.

The days of Rita's girlhood passed light-hearted, care-free and gay. Hers was the duty of tending sheep on the hill-side, to keep the strays inbound with the sharp whistle of the mountains. In the morning the prayer which was begun at her couch of straw was continued during her path up the mountain-side and in the moments when she sat in the stillness and wondered at the nearness of God. The fair-days in the Autumn meant but little to her: the quick knife-play of angry men, the ugly brawling of the women, the petty haggling of the buyers and vendors, stirred her with instinctive feelings of revulsion. And the rich-red colors of bodice and waist, the gaudy head-dress

and bright-colored beads, the tinted slippers and sandals and brilliant sash found little favor in her eyes, though she kept spotless the clothes that were hers to wear over the rugged body which plain food, sufficient rest and the rich, clear mountain air had developed for her. Like every little girl, she loved to speak to God, loved to feel the eyes of His Blessed Mother watching her, and her especially. And the trees and flowers were dear to her; the bees and the lambs she understood as other little girls understand them. All God's creatures she loved. And she was going to be a Sister.

CHAPTER II

WHEN RITA MARRIED

Such was the girlhood of Rita, who day by day grew in piety and holiness in the sight of God and of those with whom she lived. One of the witnesses in the Process of Canonization calls her a model of perfection for her love of God and of her neighbor, her love of the Sacraments and of prayer, her docility and obedience to her parents, her modesty in dress and her evenness of disposition—all of these things in such measure that she was loved by all with whom she lived. In truth, Antonio and Amata were proud of their child, whom they too loved with an immense love. They knew that they were old and they longed for the day when someone should come into their home to be a help in the household and who should guard their only daughter after death had wrapt them in his cold embrace.

And they took counsel, and together they determined to question Rita and to find out what plans she had in view. The face of

the girl became scarlet and with her lips curled in a happy smile she answered that she had already found in her heart a lover. Anxious and at the same time rejoicing, her parents asked of her the name of him that she had chosen as her companion in the paths of life. With an affection that had nothing in it of earth, and as though she saw Him that her heart loved, Rita answered: "Christ Jesus; He is my only Love. To Him alone is my heart given, and if you will but allow me I shall be His bride. And there on the mountain-side at Cascia, in the Convent of Saint Mary Magdalen, rest and peace shall be my portion." In silence her parents looked into each other's eyes. There was one dream shattered. Out of the fullness of their hearts their lips spoke, and the speech was bitter. "And so you wish to leave us alone? Shall we remain here bereft of you and abandoned by all? Our only hope rests on you. You can serve God in the world; there you can likewise save your soul. No, O Rita! You are not willing to embitter our closing days. You will not leave us in this grief. Who shall close our eyes in the

moment of death? Rita, you have been always obedient, a single glance from us was to you a command. And now you are not moved by the words of your own old father and mother? Now will you not obey them?"

And Rita stood in silent dismay. To disobey in such an important matter as marriage in her time and in her country was the unpardonable sin. The village of Roccaporena certainly held no record of such an event; even Cascia, large as it was, could not give testimony to a single instance for her memory as she searched quickly and keenly for a way out of the maze. All the girls she knew had been introduced to the young men they were to marry, given the opportunity of a yes or a no, but that generally as a matter of form, and after the betrothals had been announced and the banns published the young couple were married. In that way had their fathers and mothers married before them. One of the important duties of the fathers and mothers, and relatives too, of growing boys and girls was the duty of seeing them married early, married safely and married happily, and the

duty, generally speaking, was carefully considered and thoroughly fulfilled.

If, however, the marriage was out of the question on the part of either the bride or groom an appeal was always open to the authority of the local pastor, who was obligated to take a stand for the freedom of those who were to bind themselves by the marriage vows. And Rita considered the situation unhurried and unafraid. What God willed, she willed. She was an only child. Was her parents' will that their blood be not extinguished God's will in her regard? Or was hers the higher choice, could she follow the happier road? The problem was too difficult! The dear child felt her heart breaking and she asked of her parents time to reflect. She hastened to the feet of her Crucified Lord. She wept and prayed; from Him alone did she ask light and counsel in difficulties so bitter. And Christ Jesus, who was made obedient to His Divine Father "even unto death, and that the death of the Cross," inspired Rita that she should make a sacrifice of her longings, subjecting herself to the demands of her mother and father.

And they in turn, fearing that she might change her mind, and in order to bind her to their will for good and all, promised her hand shortly afterward in marriage. The man selected was a youth of the town, Paolo Ferdinando by name. They hoped to find in him one that would be a son to them and a husband who would love their only child. And what a sad mistake they made!

But in all Rita was working out God's holy will. Paolo was one of those young men that we meet even in our own day—clever, a born leader, high-tempered, quick-of speech and hasty in quarrel. We can scarcely explain in what manner the loving parents of Rita should select him as a bridegroom for their child. Their village was not large, it is true, and then too the young man in his dashing manner doubtless showed but one side of his character to the old couple who were anxious to settle their daughter in marriage. Perhaps it was by an extraordinary permission from God, who longed to purify Rita more perfectly and to place her as a model for every type of Christian woman. God grant that they did not draw

down upon themselves His holy anger, since they did make vain the holy vocation of their daughter for the life of a Religious. Would to God that there were not so many parents who act in like manner! But how often do Catholic parents—men and women of exemplary life—long for the well-being of their children and arrange their lives without taking count of the sacred rights which God has over children that are His gift to them!

At this time Rita was eighteen years old. Saint Augustine in one of his books tells us that the godless man lives either that he may be converted from his impiety or that through him others may find opportunity of doing good. Both ends were to be accomplished in the married life of Rita,—on the one hand, her training in virtue and her growth in goodness; on the other, the conversion of an ungodly man. Right soon did she become a young bride, and with lip trembling plighted her troth to Paolo Ferdinando. On that day, round about her, all was joy and happiness, laughter and pleasure, but deep down in her heart she sighed

for the dreams of her girlhood. Other espousals she had longed for, and quite different were her desires, but she yielded with saintly gentleness and was prompt in her obedience to the man that her parents had chosen as her companion in life. What a companion he was! The dove was made comrade of a hawk—the tender lamb a mate for a ravenous wolf. Farewell to the cloister, farewell to a life of quiet and recollection, a long farewell to the holy comradeship of Christ's chosen ones!

The wedding blossoms had scarcely wilted when Paolo, in the badness of his heart, began his career of wrong against the tender Rita. With words and looks and deeds he strove to make miserable the life that was entwined with his life. But she had learnt well in the school of Christ's sufferings, and she bore everything out of love for Christ. He was her Book, and in Him she had learnt to be patient, to be silent and to pardon. For what were her sufferings in comparison to those which He had suffered for her? She sought to forestall every wish of her husband. His glance was for her a command;

his wish the measure of her obedience, so long as that which he desired did not offend against God's holy law. Whilst he was angry, she kept silent; whilst he was brutal, she became divine; and in all things she poured forth her soul to God and begged of Him that He should send that happy day in which the sharer of her life might likewise become a sharer of her love for God. What a picture it was of Catholic wedlock! And with it all the contrast continued between the cruelty of the husband and the gentleness of the wife. Continuous was the conflict between his vice and her virtue; between his pride and her lowliness; between his savagery and her meekness; between his arrogance and her gentleness; between his power to wrong and her power to suffer. Saint Paul writes that the wife who is good and is faithful will bring back a man who is not good and who is unfaithful. This was the mission of Rita in wedlock. And how many a Rita is there today!

In the midst of her sorrow, like moments of sun after the sleet and hail, twice did Rita have the happiness of motherhood. The

first of her children she called John and the second Paul Mary. In imagination we can see the new mother who felt the sublime responsibility of her mission—all attention, all care, all anxiety—to bring up the two little boys that God had given her to nourish, sparing nothing and as occasion demanded using first promises and then punishment. Her work was neither easy nor smooth, for they had inherited their father's character—quick to anger, full of temper, disobedient, uncouth; and the cross that she carried through the wilfulness of her husband was not small, but with these—her children—that cross was made heavier still.

But Rita would not admit that she was beaten. The more clearly she saw the difficulties the harder she fought to overcome them; the more obstacles she met, the more closely she sought to surmount them with the assistance of heaven. She was not content simply with prayers to reach the goal of her own sanctification and that of her children, but she united unto them, as one may see from a casual reading of the Process, various acts of penance without, how-

ever, neglecting or slighting the duties of her home. She managed to find time for the duties of a wife, of a mother and of a Catholic. She used to dress with the greatest simplicity, but was always clean and neat. On her lips there rested always a smile of cheeriness and of pleasure without guile. Every day you would find Rita with her children, one at each side, making her way to the little parish church to assist at Holy Mass or to visit Jesus in the Sacrament of His Love. In sublime manner did she combine in herself the life of Mary and Martha—of prayer and of work. Never from her lips was there a word of bitterness, such as is frequent on the lips of the mothers of so many families, regarding the way in which her husband treated her, nor of the thoughtlessness of her children, nor of the affairs of the home. She attended to the task that came first to hand, following her own good judgment, with the aid now and then of the prudent words of her confessor. She hated and avoided evil speaking and when there came to her ears words contrary to the sweet virtue of kind speaking she sought at

once to change the topic of conversation, or she tried to cover over and to excuse the fault. And in this way she carried on a holy apostolate amidst the people of Roccaporena. She was prompt in works that were good and used to visit the sick, not only in her own neighborhood, but likewise those who were scattered far on the mountain-side. She tried to encourage them and to console them and she exhorted them, with noble, wholesome thoughts, to patience, to quiet suffering, and to a loving obedience to God's holy will, giving them so far as she could the things of which they stood in need. Above all, she saw to it, when death drew near, that they should receive the Holy Sacraments and the comforts of Christian Faith. She was loved by all; was venerated and was sought out, for she had for everyone a word of comfort and of counsel and of peace. She was the angel of Roccaporena whom the good God had raised up to encourage all in the path of virtue at a time so heavy in woe for the Church and for society. How beautiful and sweet is the life of Rita as wife and mother!

And again one finds a splendid parallel with that other woman, none the less noble and dear, Monica, mother of the great Augustine. Many indeed are the points of contact between the lives of these two mothers in the family circle. Both of them were sweet in disposition, affectionate and lovable, and each had met as a husband a man whose character was little better than the brute's, a man who spent his time making the heart of a noble woman bleed red blood. Patience, long-suffering, sheer goodness triumphed; and these women were fortunate enough to see their husbands changed and were happy in having brought them back to the path of justice. Monica, through one of her sons, became one of the great mothers and one of the most noble women the pages of history hold; Rita, through her two sons, reaches the heights of heroism. They both form most perfect models of Christian wives and Christian mothers.

But the happiness of Rita was to last but for a fleeting moment. To the west of Roccaporena there winds between the rocks, the thorn bushes and stunted trees, a steep and

crooked road that leads down to the fields from Cascia. Morning and night over that road there is a continued thronging of man and beast that go and return from their work or from the city. About a mile from Roccaporena, near the place that is called the Vigne, the road bends at sharp angles and offers a place for ambush and surprise. Late one night a laborer, wearied and alone, burdened by the tools of the field, was making his way slowly past this point into the town when he came upon a man lying face downward by the roadside. He ran to him and shook him, but there was no response. He threw from his shoulder his spade and his bundle, raised the body in his arms and gazed into the face of a dead man. It was Paolo Ferdinando, and there was a knife planted solidly right over the heart. The traveler sped on to his town, shouting the news. A crowd soon gathered at the scene of the murder; but the women of the place, feeling for the stricken Rita, betook themselves in haste to her home, and they all paused at the threshold, as no one would be the first to tap on the door. They found her

kneeling in prayer with her children beside her, in her anxiety at the unwonted delay of her husband. They tried to make easy the misfortune which had overtaken her, one with one story and another with a different tale, but the truth could not be told. They said that something had happened, perhaps to Paolo. She stood and asked them to speak plainly and at once. Then they told her what they had heard and seen. But she did not weep; her sorrow made her heart as stone. She raised her eyes to the Crucifix and her heart to the dying Lord; and she flew, followed by her sons and her relatives, to the spot where her husband lay pale in death, bathed in his own blood. She fell on her knees at the side of his body; she called out to him with the little tender words of wifely love, and her heart overflowed in sorrow and in grief. But to the sorrow of a wife there was added the resignation of a Christian to God's holy will. And whilst her two sons shrieked forth their pain and cried out to their father, snatched from them by an assassin's hand; and whilst others swore vengeance on his slayer and blas-

phemed the holy name of God, Rita kept repeating the sweet words, "Jesus! Pardon! Pardon!" In desolation she wept at a death so sudden; but her heart feared and grieved at a death unprepared. For to one of Faith, the death of the body means little compared to the eternal death of a man's soul. Without losing time she had him buried and had Mass celebrated for his soul and gave herself over to still greater penance to appease God's justice. The uncertainty and doubt that he, like thousands of others, might have been snatched away in dread moments of sin, disturbed her as nothing on this side of the grave could do. Poor Rita! Alone; altogether alone at the mercy of the world, with the heavy obligation of providing for the sustenance and the education of her children and for their training in right living. But Rita did not fear. Deep indeed was the wound in the heart of that wife, and deeper still was the wound in the heart of Rita the mother, for the scene of blood and their dead father was always before the eyes of her children. Though mere boys, they gave every proof through their words of an-

ger and their looks of hatred that they but awaited the day in which vengeance should be theirs. They too, when the time had come, would plant their dagger in the heart of the man who had murdered their father.

And Rita, their mother, was terrified at these designs of blood. She warned them solemnly and she pleaded with them, using the thousand and one arguments that only a mother knows to lead her sons to a sense of pardon. That good mother tried to make them understand that it was God who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay!" She brought them to the feet of the Crucified One; and she told them the story—ever old, yet ever new—of Jesus, Innocent Lamb, who had gone about doing good even to those that hated Him, and Who was nailed to the Cross—from it to pardon those that crucified Him. And she tried to keep from her children the blood-stained garments of their father. But it was all in vain. His ferocious temper had been begotten in his children.

Rita was desolate. Could nothing be done? A Catholic mother never falls short

in heroic resolution, once her Faith feels the need. God has given to mothers two great powers—that of prayer and of tears—two keys that open the heavens and bring down upon the earth the favors they need. And Rita knew of this power, and she prayed and wept at the foot of the Crucifix. She lifted up her eyes and opened her lips and spoke to the dying Jesus: "Dear Lord, either pardon or death. Make those sons of mine pardon from the depths of their heart the assassin of their father; make them think no more of vengeance; or do Thou, that seest me heartbroken and wretched, do Thou take them; take them in death before they can accomplish the design they propose!" A sacrifice such as this, and heroism like this, are rare; and we are obliged to write down the name of Rita beside those names of the mothers of martyrs—with the Maccabees, with Felicitas, and with Symphorosa—who encouraged their children, even with their last breath, to endure suffering and death rather than depart ever so little from the law of God. They preferred that the life of this world should be blotted out rather than that

eternal life should be made impossible. How great is a mother's love when it is founded in the love of God! And heaven heard the prayer of Rita; even within the year, one after the other, her children died, before evil should pervert their intellect, before their hearts should be hardened in crime. And their mother, bereft, offered them with bleeding heart in the assurance that after a little while she should be united once more with her dear ones in the Kingdom of God. Her soul was torn with grief, but she placed above every other thing her love for God and her hatred of wrong-doing.

And now it was all over. Rita had overcome and had broken the ties of blood and of heart. Once more she was alone! But solitude for her was not sterile and dark, dead and black. It was not the solitude of those far from human sympathy, of those who knew not where next to look for comfort. Her solitude was radiant and calm. In it her soul was far from the world and its bustle, and in union with God. She illustrated perfectly the life of the true Christian widow, as Paul the Apostle described

her in his Epistle to Timothy. She cast herself entirely within the arms of Providence, and left herself to be governed by Providence, with confidence and trust and with the complete abandonment of a child in the arms of its mother. Day and night she passed in prayer, in penance and in good deeds. They tell of her, during this period of her life, that one day she met on the roadside a beggar, trembling and almost perishing in the cold, and that from her shoulders she took her cloak to cover the man in his misery. Such was her love for God and man!

In the heart of Rita there burned once more that longing of other days—that desire for the life of the cloister. What was she to do in the world? The Lord God was her only desire. Perhaps it was possible that she might be a servant in the house of the virgins of the Lord. It might be possible that they would close the convent doors against her; and yet she knew of Angela of Foligno, and so of many others who were widows that had been received into the life of the convents and there had reached the

goal of sanctity. Yes, she felt in her heart once more the old-time desire to come nearer to God within the convent walls, unknown by all, and far from the vanities of the world.

CHAPTER III

HOW RITA CAME TO CASCIA

OUR Rita accordingly began to make preparations for a state of perfect Christian living. Like a dove she sighed and sought a refuge—a solitary place in which she might rest. She was led by the spirit of the Lord and she found it in a cave, situated on the peak of Roccaporena. This peak resembles a giant tower of stone, about five hundred feet in height. To the left of the little city a narrow, rocky, winding path led to the top, where there was a grotto, roofed over by the extension of an immense boulder. Rita, in her home in Roccaporena, had often looked toward it with longing; and one day she closed the door of her home and in her intense desire to be alone, all alone for time to think and to pray, she made her way slowly up the face of the cliff to the shelter of its quaint solitude.

When one's heart is desolate, one of two courses is open: either to lose one's self and to forget one's sorrow in the manifold constant activity of the crowd, or to be alone,

RITA ENTERS THE CONVENT

absolutely alone with God. In our own day, the first and not the second is the path usually chosen. God seems to so many hearts so far away; to many minds under the influence of an education which has eliminated the thought of God from the schools, or of an environment which takes Him into account ever so rarely, God's presence is so shadowy, so unreal, that the second course is out of the question. We should go mad; for a mind which feeds on nothing but itself is mad. But to Rita, whose life was simplicity itself in the vivid thought of God's presence, the first course would have been waste of time—and time was one of the few treasures she had. Within this cave on the mountain-top she could gather once more the strained threads in her life; she could accustom herself to the change which the death of her husband and of her children imposed on her manner of life; she could raise herself above the passing, fleeting things of yesterday and the day before; she could learn to see things in their truer light, and in the seeing gain renewed courage and a new measure of the fullness of God's love.

No men have ever loved nature more deeply than the Saints; no men ever appreciated more the beauty of the wide ocean, of the level plain, of the towering mountain crags than those who saw above all places, raised high on His cross, the Lord of the world, the God whose power nature breathes. But particularly in the wild majesty of the mountains did they find the rugged beauty that furnished food for exalted thought. The myriads of stars in the vast vault of the heavens taught the great lesson of man's littleness; the tender fern, thrusting its roots into the sparse soil, whispered in its perfect structure God's love even for the tiniest creature; the hushed silences of long days and nights begot the habit of silence and of simple speech; everything that struck the senses made for a more perfect simplicity and a more simple perfection. And in the mountains the freer air, the coarse diet, the absence of the din of city and town combined to make men more ready for arduous tasks and for lofty enterprises. The history of the Church in all ages attests to this fact in striking manner, for the mountain homes

of the Saints are noteworthy. There is Subiaco and Monte Cassino, Alvernia, Camaldoli and Senario, and each of them is epoch-making in the records of Catholic Faith.

And so it was that Rita longed to make her dwelling-place upon that height and to live, hidden from the eyes of the world, uniting her present life with that which she had lived as a girl in the house of her parents. With two pieces of wood she made for herself a rough cross and on her knees before it she poured forth her heart, filled as it was with love for the Passion and sufferings of Christ Jesus, and meditations and tears were united in the stillness to the rough swishing of the scourge that Christ Jesus had suffered for her.

Yet, as day followed day, in the heart of Rita there remained still one desire. She was satisfied, neither by her solitary life in her father's home nor by her days as a hermit near Roccaporena. There was still something more—she must go still higher. And in the same manner as from her home she looked to the peak, so from the peak

does her anxious eye turn toward a point still higher. There her hopes were to be fulfilled, and there her heart to be rested. There would she surely find the treasure she sought—in Cascia. Hail! O name dear to every Christian heart, thou dost remind us of Rita, the heroine of the Fifteenth Century, Saint of the Impossible, who, though she was born in Roccaporena, has nevertheless received her name from thee because of the many years she spent near thy heart, because within thy walls she died and because in one of thy monasteries her body is honored by all that love her.

It is said by some that the city of Cascia was established where in ancient days Cursola stood, a municipality of the Roman Empire. The approach to it is through the mountains and it is built on the side of a hill amidst a thousand fruit-bearing trees, most of them almonds. At the foot of the hill flows the winding Corno. Of the Cascia of today history makes mention for the first time in 553. Besides the splendid Roman ruins, it has many works of art in painting and in architecture. Its crown, or rather

its gem, is Rita the Saint. Even in our own days, within the moss-covered walls of the city, the old convent still stands. And it does stand, like a tower that cannot be broken, the only building remaining after the fearful earthquake of January 14, 1703, which razed to the earth all else in Cascia.

About the year 1000, so it seems, the Augustinians built their church and monastery and the convent of the nuns on the site of a pagan temple. History tells us that many from Cascia entered this monastery. The names of Blessed John, of Hugo, of Simone Fidati, all of them shining lights of sanctity and of zeal, testify to the spirit which prevailed there. Exemplars so bright, which were yet new while Rita lived, were a spur to her and inflamed in her heart the desire for a life ever more perfect under the rule of the great Augustine. And since it had not been possible for her to become a nun in her youth, she longed now to join the ranks of the Sisters. She knew the names of the holy widows who had given themselves to the religious life: Bridget of Sweden, Frances of Rome, Angela of

Foligno. What they had done, should she not be able to do? She puts into action her heart's desire. Down from the grotto on the Scoglio she came; she set in order the things of her house and made her way up the path to Cascia to the convent of Saint Mary Magdalen, where the Augustinian Sisters lived. Her heart sang a hymn of joy at the prospect before her. This was the day she had dreamt of when she received her First Holy Communion; this was the path she had trodden in slumber many and many a time. There before her was the stunted tree and on the other side of it she would catch her first glimpse of Cascia—the grey walls of the city, the square towers of the churches, the red terra cotta tiles of the roofs, the yellow and white of the walls, the almond groves and vineyards above the town on the hill-side, and down in the valley on either side of the white highroad that led from Serra Valle.

But here at the turn of the road was the spot where they had found the body of her husband. What joy his conversion had brought! True to God, he was then like-

wise true to her; and in those last days how thoroughly he had made up for the days that were gone. They had built there by the roadside a heap of white stone, and over it his kinsfolk had erected a rough cross, an act of loving piety, which was done for all that met death on the road by violence. There she knelt, her heart torn with the grief that had not healed. With a prayer on her lips she went down into the valley and took the white highroad that led up the hill-side to Cascia. The swallows overhead whirled and dipped and circled, calling and loitering in the sunlight; over the stones of the walls by the roadside the lizards, roused from their sleep in the sun, scurried swiftly into the crevices, and the almond trees in full blossom were white against the duller green of the olive groves. Into the gate of the city, and straight up the roughly-paved street, past the church of the Augustinians to the portals of the Convent she hastened. Her heart swelled within her. Could they refuse her? She would enter simply as a servant. Perhaps the Mother Abbess would not take her even for a servant. Other convents had

received widows amidst the numbers of their Sisters, but she could not recall that they had done so here. Perhaps it would be better to turn back and not to ask that day. She rings the bell; the steps of the Sister resound on the bricked floor within; the panel is slipped back, and Rita replies to the greeting of the Nun, "Let us bless the Lord," with the salutation, "To God be thanks." She asks for the Mother Abbess, the Superior of the Convent. The heavy bolts were drawn back, the grating of the key in the lock reminded her of the line which was drawn between her life at Roccaporena and in the grotto and the life here within the Convent. She was admitted to the visitors' room to the right. And she waited in patience. No sooner did she put her eyes upon that Mother of the Sisters, when she cast herself at the feet of the woman consecrated to God and in all humility laid bare the desire of her heart to remain there to serve the Lord for the remainder of her days. The Superior answered her that following the Rule of the Convent it would be impossible to admit one who had not come to them in

earliest girlhood. This was the tradition of the House, a custom which in long centuries had never been broken, a binding law which she would be the last to think of breaking, though she was sorry for the all too evident disappointment which Rita's quivering lips could scarcely hide. Out again from the cool tranquillity of the Convent into the noisy sunlight Rita made her way, back to her home in Roccaporena. But Rita would not admit defeat. Again on another day, and once again, did she return to knock at the blessed gates of the Convent. She prayed and wept and pleaded that they accept her, but all in vain. So she returned to her cave at the Scoglio in sorrow but not in surrender, wearied but not abandoned, grieving but not broken. And if she met any one of her friends who asked her whence she had come and where she had been, Rita with a little smile would answer, "I have been to the House of the Lord, but I found the gate closed against me."

Someone has said that "Nothing is difficult for him that will firmly will." The truth of this aphorism we see every day, in-

somuch as whosoever has in truth will-power and firmness in seeking a goal overcomes any and all difficulties. And this, even more than in the visible order, we see working itself out as a truth of supernatural life, for God, who gives both to will and to do, never fails those that strive to love Him. Rita had determined in her heart to embrace the religious life. She had dreamt of it from her tenderest years and now, freed from every responsibility, she was decided on going to the Convent and to the Convent of the Augustinian Nuns of the city of Cascia. However, a long-established custom of this Convent caused her to be rejected. She thought herself on the other hand most unworthy to be received into the Convent of the Sisters. Like an author who sees most clearly the defects of his own work and gives his whole attention to correct them and perfect it, so did Rita with her own conscience. She began to examine with scrupulous care her life and studied her soul to its very depths. She redoubled her penances and her mortifications. With scourgings and long vigils she prayed the good Lord to fill out

the measure of her desires and to crown her hopes. Ah! that Convent in Cascia! She would turn to the Saints of God that they help her. Through a certain similarity of circumstances at her birth, she had professed from her earliest childhood a special devotion to John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ Jesus. In her youth, when she was thinking of becoming an Augustinian, she had placed herself under the protection of Saint Augustine and that of Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, the Augustinian whose fame as wonder-worker and whose glorious name was resounding not only through all Italy but even through the entire world. With all her heart she prayed to these three holy guides and protectors that they might aid her and intercede for her at the throne of God. She willed at every cost to be successful in her attempt to fill out her long-standing desire.

It was a night in 1416. The good Rita, in her modest little home, remained still awake whilst all the world took its needed repose; she was wrapt in thought on Christ's sufferings and from her heart there broke

forth sighs and tears. How long, O Lord, how long! When wilt Thou console Thy handmaid? Thou hast broken with all powerful hand the chains that I bound about me through obedience, and now wilt Thou close the road for me? Wilt Thou make my path impassable? And you, my dear and holy guides, why do you not come to my assistance? Why do you not intercede for me? And she wept and wept bitterly with all the bitterness of her heart. And as if in answer to her prayers, there was a knock at the door and she heard her name whispered, "Rita," "Rita." She rose to her feet in wonder at the sound and trembled in fear. Who can this be in the very heart of the night? Whose voice is it? God be with us! Darkness in the valley was profound and silence reigned supreme, broken only by the waters of the neighboring streams rushing in the darkness over the rocks. And there was no one to be seen. In trembling she returns to her prayers. Hark! Once more the knock at the door and the voice that calls her. Was she being made sport of by the powers of dark-

ness? There was surely no one in sight, no human being, as she goes to the window. She threw herself once more at the foot of the Crucifix afraid, and then a ray of God's truth brightens up her mind and she understands in that voice Christ's invitation and call. The message that echoed in her heart was that which was chanted to the Spouse in the Canticles, "Rise, hasten, my friend, O soul most beautiful, and come. The winter is now past and the rain gone and the turtle dove is heard round about us. Come! Thine every desire shall be filled. Come to the cloister." And Rita felt herself clothed with a hidden force and though her heart beat madly she rushed to the door of her house and there she saw three venerable guides who invited her to follow them. Filled with joy, she recognized in them her holy patrons—John the Baptist, Saint Augustine and Saint Nicholas of Tolentino.

The night was still and the stars gleaming shone with bright light over the mountains of Cascia, perfumed by the breath of the late spring-time and by the roses and by the million trees blossoming into flower. The

nightingale made the valleys echo with his night-song, limpid and startling clear. As though in holy nuptials with the harmonies of Paradise, heaven and earth now made festive occasion of the journey of Rita from Roccaporena to Cascia, where she was to find her true Spouse. No longer the rough path in the heat of the mid-day, no longer the journey which should end at the convent door. Her saintly guides took their stand before the convent of the Magdalen, while invisible hands opened its door and Rita entered and made her way to the choir of the Nuns. And here the Saints disappeared and she found herself alone, all alone in the darkness whose shadows were made deeper by the little light of red that burned before the altar of the Sacramental Jesus. Whom could she thank? And how could she ever thank them? What would the Mother Abbess say? In her room, securely kept, hung the great key of the outer door and the cloister-key. She knew where they were and where they had been at every hour of the night, and no one could touch them. She knew the age-long Rule of the Convent;

her advisers amongst the Sisters would stand by her, and with the keenness which long years spent close to the Tabernacle of the Lord gives to every heart, no pious fraud could deceive them.

Rita could scarcely believe her own eyes. A riot of emotion agitated her heart—gratitude, humility, amazement, uncertainty, fear—and a burst of tenderness like a hymn broke out from the very depths of her heart to thank God, who by means of His own divine aid had wished to transplant her into His own chosen garden. And at that moment the bell of the Convent rang out in the silence calling the Sisters to sing Matins, to render praise to the Lord in the ancient songs of the Church, "Alleluia! Come, let us adore the Lord in His ascension into heaven! Alleluia!" More easily indeed may we imagine the surprise and the marvel of these holy women than tell it, when they saw the little widow of Roccaporena, who in all humility knelt praying in the convent-choir. The gates of the Convent were closed and had been closed and the keys kept, in accordance with the Rule, close to the hand of

a Mother rigid in convent law and observances. How then had she entered? And they stood there and questioned her. And with heart full of joy she told them of all that had happened during the long night. No heart that loved truth could doubt the truth of her story. Utter simplicity of heart and perfect candor are qualities too rare in every age not to command respect once they are met, and here was the simplicity of a child. Doubt gave way to belief, belief to welcome and welcome to thanksgiving. From the soul of all the Religious a canticle of praise and of thanksgiving rose to God for the great deeds that were accomplished. And then Rita again laid bare the desire of her soul in all modesty: "Sisters, chosen virgins of the Lord, I beg of you the charity of a resting-place in your midst, to serve during the rest of my life our God within convent walls. I am not worthy,—that I know, for I am nothing but a mean, poor, broken widow. But have mercy on my pleading." Tears of tenderness were the eloquent answer on the part of the Religious and the kiss of peace was the seal of it all, and Rita was ac-

cepted in the Convent of Cascia. The desire of Rita was finally satisfied, and Heaven itself had come to her aid that it might be satisfied. Thus Rita came to Cascia.

And now Rita was happy. Nothing else did she seek, nothing else did she long for, nothing else did she desire. She had gained all. She was happy in the home of the Lord, to whose service she would be completely dedicated. And there, amidst the pure joys of prayer, in the sweet rest of the silence of the Convent, amidst the holy company of the virgins, her sisters, she would pass the rest of her life, firm in her heroic purpose to make herself one of the Saints of God. The clearness of the dawn began to dim the stars, scattered in the wide circle of heaven that stretched over the valley of Cascia, even down to the level plains of Norcia. And the sun, with its rosy fingers, began to color with tints of purple the mountain heights which were yet whitened with the snows. And the Sisters of the Convent of the Magdalen in Cascia began to sing forth their praises to the sweet Jesus.

CHAPTER IV

RITA'S CONVENT DAYS

LIKE a spouse all dressed in white, her forehead garlanded with flowers, Rita stood one day shortly after her entrance, at the foot of the altar, where she was received by the Father Chaplain of the Convent, whilst the Religious stood round about her like a crown. He asked her: "Rita, what do you seek?" And the postulant answered: "The mercy of God and the company of these Religious living under the rule of Saint Augustine." Question and answer grew more gripping until finally the priest asked her: "Are you ready to renounce all things—the devil, the world, and the flesh, even yourself—to follow Jesus in the path of Perfect Life?" Resolutely and humbly, Rita answered: "Yes, with the help of God and through His grace." "Very well; far from you be these vanities of the world. Divest yourself of the old life with its evil desires and put on a new life created in justice and in sanctity." And Rita cast from

her the ornaments which were upon her. They seemed to weigh like bonds of iron. She joined her arms on her breast and received the blessed Habit of the Augustinian Nun over her shoulders. A cincture of black leather they placed about her loins and a ring of silver on her marriage finger. Great was the consolation of the heart of Rita in vesting herself with the heavy woolen garments of the Nuns in Cascia. She thus began the year of trial called her "novice year."

This year is set apart in every Convent to try the new Religious. It is the preparation for profession in which a Religious promises to observe the counsels of the Gospels. But this good novice had no need of proofs for her call to the life of the Convent; for her it should be a time of ever greater correspondence with the extraordinary graces which the Lord had bestowed. And how well indeed did she correspond with those graces! She began the noble and sublime edifice of her new life by digging deep the foundations of humility in a lowly idea of her own worth; with the doing of every

labor, even the lowliest in the Convent, feeling that she was unworthy to be found with the spouses of Jesus. She sought to strip herself of all that which might be earthy in her heart and to be entirely dedicated to Jesus; to deprive herself of her own will, taking as her rule even the wishes of the Mother of the Convent. In this year of novitiate her development in all the virtues most dear to the heart of Christ was remarkable. Her soul was like a field in the spring-time in which the most beautiful and sweet flowers take root, grow and break forth; and the Sisters, at the sight of such a wealth of merit were edified; fervor increased; and there was a holy emulation to see that Rita should not be alone in the path of perfect living. They gave thanks to God for having granted to their Convent a vase of election; and in happiness they enjoyed the consolations of Paradise in Rita's company. But she did not become proud, nor did she change from the idea of her own unworthiness. Frequently was she heard to repeat: "Lord, I am not worthy of Thy goodness! Help this vile sinner!" And

while she turned her whole attention toward enriching her soul with every virtue, she longed for that day in which she should return once more to the foot of the altar to be bound in the bonds of the three vows by means of religious profession. The happy day finally came—hurried as it was by the sighs and tears of Rita.

There is no one, no matter how hard his heart may be, that can assist at the ceremony of religious profession without being moved, even to the verge of tears. This sight was offered us now by Rita. Again at the foot of the altar in her profession she bound herself by oath to the three vows of obedience, poverty and chastity; and she accepted the rule of her Holy Father Augustine, promising to observe it even until death. In truth, now she could call herself Spouse of Christ Jesus, for she was consecrated to Jesus with an irrevocable vow. She enjoyed the happiness of a soul that was eminently religious, dedicated to the service of God—her only portion in eternity. Her soul was filled with holy rejoicing, flooded with the peace of the Lord; and she felt the need of

being alone with her Divine Spouse to render unto Him thanks for the gifts He had given her. While she poured out her soul in the sight of God, the Lord wished to show unto her His acceptance of her offering, and wrapt in sweet ecstasy, she saw that which was revealed in times long gone to Jacob on his pilgrimage, a staircase of great height that rested upon the earth and stretched even to the heavens. The angels of God went up and came down upon it; and there at the head of the staircase was the Lord, inviting the newly-made Religious to come even unto Him. Once more she returned to herself. She passed over in mind the vision that had been granted and understood well in the high staircase a symbol of the path of perfect living that she should have to mount to reach that Good for which we are all created—God Himself. And to reach this height it was necessary for her to labor in the same manner as one struggles to attain the height of the mountain-top; in this way alone would she arrive in the presence of God.

A celebrated preacher has given us re-

garding this vision of Saint Rita the following beautiful thoughts: "Rita once more returned to her senses, began to consider the mystery of this staircase of God; and she reflected that only angels ascended by means of this staircase; and she recognized the fact that she was obligated to obtain for herself the virtues of the angels, to enable her likewise to make the journey. She knew that the three essential vows of the religious life—obedience, poverty and chastity—were the first steps. She recognized in the angels chastity in their purity; obedience in their work; and their poverty, insomuch as the angels have no desire for the things of earth. But as the staircase had many steps, she recognized the fact that she was, moreover, held to make her way over the steps of the other virtues to arrive at Paradise—the enjoyment of the supreme happiness in the sight of God. And Rita understood very well that she could not stand still but that she was bound to ascend on this ladder. She made her way, therefore, growing each day in virtue and perfection, to have merit

by which she should rise on the path to heaven."

For Christ Jesus had said: "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me." And Rita held fast to the program of the Master; and she followed in the difficult road of virtue, modelling herself upon the Divine Model. The practice of virtue was not difficult to her because, as we have seen, she had been trained in it from her earliest years. She made, therefore, giant strides, confident in grace, to ascend the mystic staircase and to reach the goal she longed for—the perfection of a Nun, to which she was obliged by her solemn profession.

Whilst it is not difficult to trace the path Rita took as maiden, wife and mother, here we must pause for a moment. We have admired and have wondered at the power of the Catholic Church, which simply by its own inherent strength could accomplish a work which in our day we deem impossible. Culture and poverty seldom go hand in hand; ignorance and the lack of book knowledge are very often taken to be one and the same

thing; selfishness and uncouthness are understood to be the first twin sisters of poverty and lack of learning; high ideals of self-sacrificing, all-embracing love for one's fellow-man are considered the exclusive property of learning, culture and extensive knowledge. Rita—till her thirty-fifth year —could neither read nor write. Perhaps, like the great Saint Catherine of Sienna, she learnt late in life. Rita had none of the training which contact with men and women of culture gives. Rita was poor, born in a poor out-of-the-way place no larger than two city blocks, and had lived within a radius of ten miles of that spot all the days of her life. Her sole inspiration was her Church. It taught her in the simple, clear language of truth; its ideals were impressed on her heart in the vivid messages of its Sacraments; it gave to her life a knowledge of the depth and the breadth and the height of God's love for us all, and of His love for those that had strayed from the better path to their sorrow. Her fidelity was the proof of its teaching; her frequent reception of the Sacraments gave her the true culture of

heart in unselfish self-restraint out of love for her neighbor, the self-effacement and poise, the confidence in power that an accomplished lady of the great world would envy from her heart; and the knowledge of Christ's love for men, which He showed forth so clearly in His passion and death, made her long to spend herself, body and soul, that she might bring home to her fellow-man the hidden lesson of the mystery of suffering. She was intensely lovable—with the low voice, the clear eye, the winning smile, the keen mind, the warm heart, that marks the final product of exquisite modern culture. Beyond these gifts, her Church had given to her life a simplicity which made it a work of perfect art. Now in the Convent that lovable simplicity, that simple sheer loveableness was to find the suffering Christ as the object of its affections, and in Him all hearts that sorrow. She was to comfort the Heart of Christ by the perfect yielding of herself to Him, that she might be able to make light the burdens of humanity. She was to take in her own humble way upon her shoulders His cross, to follow Him, to deny

herself,—that she might be a helper in the cause of our happiness. Perfect poverty, perfect chastity, perfect obedience were to make of a great woman a still greater Nun; her prayers and her austerities were to set aside for us a store of graces which, through Christ's merits, were to obtain for us favors of such power as to earn for her the title: "Rita, Saint of the Impossible."

But how is one to tell of this hidden life? Can one tell the secrets of a book simply by reading the title on the cover? Can one tell the color of the heart of a candle flame simply from watching the tip? Can one read the inscription on the face of a coin simply by studying the letters on the back? Can one read the secret of the beauty of a rose by laying off the petals one by one? How then are we to unveil the hidden charm of Rita's life of sanctity? We can recount her deeds, yet they are so few and not at all wonderful; we know what the line of duty day after day marked out for her. We can see her in the early morning, two hours after midnight, making her way to the chapel, one amongst the silent Nuns, down

the long corridor, for the early recitation of the praises of God. We can see the calm white faces under the white veils; we can hear the low whispering of the chant, the reverent recitation of the Office of the Church. But can we see the spirit of God's love which gives meaning to it all? We can see the Sisters at Holy Mass and at meditation, after a few hours' repose. But can we see the union of body and soul with Christ's body and blood, soul and divinity, the union in prayer with the Holy Spirit which gives these acts their sense and meaning? We can see the toil in the garden and over the fields in silence out of love for God's creatures, in reverence for the great silence in which God works most powerfully and most strongly in the world of nature and of grace. We can see the return to the chapel at midday for prayer and further thought in the presence of God, the frugal meal toward one o'clock, the brief repose in the very heart of the day, the handicraft of the Nuns in making beautiful vestments for the service of the Church, of the altar, of the shrines, or the rougher work for the children of the

poor and needy that came so confidently to the Convent gate. We can see the Vesper prayers said, supper partaken of, and recreation, the first break in the silence of the day, and then about nine o'clock repose. But what pen shall point out for us the burning love for Mary Magdalen, for Mary the Spotless Virgin, for Christ Jesus the Lord, that ennobled every single deed and gave a supreme value to the life of Rita, a value which merited heaven for her, and for us a thousand favors of mind and heart, of soul and body?

We shall therefore be content, knowing well what spirit is there. We shall read, each for himself, the secrets of her life-book by a brief glance at the chapter titles; we shall rest in the rays of the candle light, satisfied that there is no ray which does not come from the heart of the flame; we shall be satisfied one day to see the face on the coin merited by God's goodness in Rita's body; we love the more dearly the beauty of this rose, knowing that its beauty is beyond and above the beauty of any of its parts.

In the book of the Gospels there are

both precepts and counsels—the first for everyone; the second for those who wish to follow Christ Jesus more closely. Rita, after having been observant in the precepts of God in the world,—and a rigorous follower—now with the solemn vows in the cloister was ready to put into practice the counsels of obedience, of poverty and of chastity that are opposed to the three-fold human concupiscence. The first of these concupiscences has its source in one's own independence and liberty, which breaks the bounds that honesty has placed through law, human and divine. And whilst the other two longings of the flesh develop with the increase of years, this particular one reveals itself from the outset. The Scripture says: "The obedient man shall sing of victories." And it is right, because to obey means nothing else than to strip self of its own will in order to follow a better Will, expressed in laws that are wise and holy or impersonated by those in legitimate authority that are given as a guide for those under them. In following a better will the germs of evil are smothered; and at the end one

does chant the hymn of the greatest victory —that of good over evil. Rita longed for this and accustomed herself not to make a distinction in what was commanded, how it was commanded and why. Before her eyes she kept Jesus the Divine Model, who for our sake was become obedient even unto death, and unto the death of the Cross. Accordingly she was, as we have seen, always obedient, as a child, as girl and as wife. She became a heroine of obedience when she bound herself to this virtue by solemn vows. It might be said that she no longer permitted herself to enjoy her free will except to submit her own will with joy to that which was ordered by the holy law of her Convent, and by the command of her Superior in religious life. All the writers of her life attest that from the first day she entered the Monastery, down to the last day of her life, every moment was an uninterrupted act of prompt, sincere and humble obedience. To try her spirit of obedience the Mother Abbess one day commanded her to keep moist the earth near an arid branch which had been planted between the cistern

and the wall of the Convent, and to water that plant each day until it blossomed; and Rita, as though she had been commanded the most natural thing in the world, obeyed with promptness. Morning and evening, in good weather and in bad weather, in winter and in summer, she went to the well and watered the plant. The Sisters laughed at her simplicity. One of them jested with her and said, "Sister Rita, have you noticed that that dead branch is putting on green leaves?" A smile was Rita's only reply; and she continued the work that was given her with gentleness and meekness. For an entire year this strange watering was continued, until one day, to the amazement of all in the Convent, that arid branch gave forth leaves, extended clinging branches, showed forth its blossoms and became a living vine. Today, after six centuries, this vine still lives, its grapes are asked for and sent to every part of the world to obtain favors from the dear Saint. It is the Vine of Saint Rita.

If Rita was rigorous in the observance of her vow of obedience, she practiced with no

less perfection her vow of poverty. Even as a girl she loved poverty, when she would hide to avoid uncalled-for excess in dress; and this simple act revealed in her that true spirit of poverty that began to flourish and to be perfect after her solemn vows. It is sufficient to note, to show how carefully she did observe poverty, that she had during her entire life in the Convent, forty years, a single habit, and in this habit she was buried. Her dwelling, too, consisted in a little quiet cell, the poorest of them all, which was located in the farthest corner of the Convent, near the door that led to the garden. The light was poor and the furnishings of the cell were extremely simple. In one corner there was a heap of stones, on which was planted a rough cross of wood, and on the ground before it this holy woman passed hour after hour in the thought of the Sorrows of the God-made Man. There was likewise a poor kneeling-bench and a bed, the one for her prayers and the other for her hours of repose during the night. In her last illness only did she consent to rest her wearied body on a less miserable couch

of straw, covered by a white linen sheet. In this room today there has been built a little chapel, kept as it was about the time of the Saint. Under the little altar where Holy Mass is celebrated there is kept the casket where the body of Rita was placed after her death and where it remained for two hundred and eighty-nine years. The poverty of Rita found place likewise in her food, which consisted generally of a little bread and water, to which she added occasionally a plate of bitter herbs. And so, while she rigorously observed her vow of poverty, she guarded herself on all sides so as not to fall short in the holy vow of chastity.

The Saints know well that the body, covered with elegant vesture and abundantly nourished, is not well disposed to the holy tranquillity of chastity. And our Rita loved this virtue with an especial love, for it renders man on earth like unto the angels of God in heaven. From her earliest years she had watched and guarded this virtue with most jealous care. In her youth, her earliest youth, she had dedicated herself to God and sought no other Spouse but

Christ Jesus. She bent low her head to the command of her parents. But what a sacrifice it was that the heart of Rita made! She preserved, however, the chastity of married life; and she spent the years of widowhood, young though she was, with the greatest circumspection. Now she was happy. At peace, she no longer turns back in thought to the past. She put into practice every one of those means which a good heart suggests and the counsels of the Saints. She likewise experienced that warfare which humanity knows; and in order not to see the spirit vanquished by the flesh she not only guarded with scrupulous care her senses, but when they would escape from control she placed them under the discipline of the scourge, the hair shirt and long fasts. When the temptation waxed strongest, she took even stronger measures to conquer in God's name; and the enemy of all good was troubled to see such austerity in the preservation of virtue, for he hoped for a triumph over the heart of Rita. And so Rita made her way along in the path of religious perfection, filling out all the other duties of her

life in perfect measure—the Rule she had embraced and the Constitution of the Convent—with a heart always ready and cheerful. To this work she united numerous other deeds, always dependent, however, on the will of her Superior and of her Confessor. By this perfect submission to the Rules and to the will of those to whom the care of her soul was confided by God; by a complete separation from the things of the earth that were of today and the day before; by a rigorous observance of purity of mind and of body, Rita's soul made continued progress on that staircase of perfection, which consists in nothing more or less than perfect love for God Himself.

Although here and there, when the occasion presented itself, we have noted the fasts and the penances of Rita, it seems best not to touch on these points simply in passing but to dwell more amply on those characteristics of the holy life of Rita of Cascia. While she was yet a child she gave signs of a love for fasting; and as a young girl, as a married woman and as a widow, she led a life of mortification and of penance. As a

Religious one might say that she passed all her time in continued penance and in mortification without ceasing. She would wrap about her body the rough hair cloth, and frequently she scourged herself even unto blood. She would rise at midnight from the kneeling-bench, where she had knelt to take scourging, applying the merit of this punishment in honor of the scourging of Jesus for the souls of the dead; and during the day this was twice repeated—the first time for the conversion of sinners, the second time for the benefactors of the Monastery and of the Order. And for food, usually she ate nothing except the roughest and the coarsest diet in very small quantities and mixed very often with the roots of a bitter plant that grew wild on the mountains of Cascia. Three times during the year did she keep the forty days, all the vigils of the Saints, of the Blessed Mother and of Our Lord; and in particular the feasts of her Order and of her own special Protectors. Every Friday and Saturday she partook of nothing but bread and water; such indeed was her abstinence that she seemed reduced to skin and bone.

Her Sisters often asked her how she could live on such little food, and with a smile she used to answer, "I have a food which nourishes me that you cannot see; I find it in the Sacred Wounds of Christ Jesus." But her mortification did not compel her to leave aside her duties as a Sister in the Convent. When love called her she was always the first and the strongest; and her love for her neighbor kept her always occupied, and she hastened about eagerly; she flew everywhere, an angel of consolation.

In Rita's day there existed a sort of Cloister Rule which was dependent on the Abbess; and so it was that our Saint could go out from the Monastery and betake herself where she believed that her work would be of help, especially to bring peace in moments of discord, something that was necessary during the days in which she lived. This work she did with such modesty, steadiness and gravity that she edified all in the highest degree. She practiced that virtue of which our holy Father Saint Augustine speaks in that Rule, which is the sublimest codex—a masterpiece of monastic living:

"In your walk and in your deportment and in your dress, and in every outward action, do nothing which may offend the eye of others, but rather that which corresponds to your holy vocation." The modesty of Rita reached the point where it might have been said to be excessive, insomuch as speaking with various persons she could affirm that she did not see them but that she had heard them speak. Her words had a sweetness that comforted every wound of soul and body. She put herself out in suffering and trouble for all; and she took pleasure in doing these lowliest and most hidden duties, fulfilling them with quickness and thoroughness as though they were the nearest thoughts of her heart. It followed that not only in Roccaporena and Cascia, but likewise in the towns of the neighborhood, whatsoever the circumstance and no matter how serious the illness, they sought no one but Rita; they wished no one but her and they asked for no one else. And a long chorus of blessings accompanied her wheresoever she went; and our good Rita, with a smile of happiness always on her lips and a kind

word and a happy one always in her mouth, used to return home satisfied with having helped and aided her own dear Jesus, in the person of her suffering fellow-being.

And if she did exercise such love in her work amongst those outside the Convent, to whom duty sometimes called her, how much the greater was her loving-kindness towards her sisters in religion! The Process tells us that she made herself the humblest servant of all; and until the time when sickness separated her from them she was always prompt in helping, in serving and in consoling them in every circumstance, supporting, for the sweet sake of Christ, even unmerited rebuke. She was never in idleness, always occupied in the work of the house or the garden, or again in prayer, knowing well that the devil tempts, and often successfully, in moments of silence and of quiet. And accordingly we are not surprised that if she preserved herself in the world, now she should make gigantic strides in her work as a Religious. Having used such scrupulous care over her senses, she now established a pact with her body not to give it rest or

repose till after death. There were no pretexts and no excuses to exempt her or to dispense her from her Rule or her Constitutions, and from her scrupulous observance of the Rule of her holy Father Saint Augustine. Well merited is the line of praise which was written by Cardinal Parocchi when he said, "That Rule of Saint Augustine, filled with the spirit of the penance of the Gospel, founded on Charity, the beginning and end of perfection, Rita had stamped on her memory so perfectly, written in her heart so clearly and exemplified in her life so brightly, that if it were possible that Saint Augustine's Rule be lost we should find it entirely and in its living beauty by a consideration of Rita's life." The existence of our heroine was nothing if not a continued ascent to the goal she had set for herself, namely, the goal of perfect sainthood. It would seem that Rita, from the cradle to the grave, did nothing but gather the flowers most perfect and sweetest in the field of virtue and weave them together in garlands to adorn herself, body and soul, for she did love these flowers that never

grow stale even in the coming of death, but that serve in a special manner to crown Christ's chosen ones in heaven. Their fragrance was hidden in the very depths of her soul and was poured forth into the world by means of her works. They revealed themselves principally in those virtues which are the foundation stones of all others and which have for their object God Himself.

If "Faith without works is dead," as St. James says, it follows that the vitality of Faith is nourished by good works. The greater these works shall be in number and intensity, the more alive will Faith be. And in Rita good works shone forth with sovereign light to prove the first of the virtues of God. We have seen how, from her earliest years, her example in piety, in devotion, in frequenting the Sacraments and in the practice of every goodness was beyond the ordinary; and the constant tradition of the good people of Roccaporena assures us that Rita was not only a Saint, but that she was a Saint from childhood up, and with an increase in years there grew in her the habit of Faith. How she thanked God that He

granted her the privilege of being born in the bosom of the Catholic Church! She used to express the desire, one of the witnesses testifies, that Christ's Church be spread throughout the world; and she would have willingly poured forth her blood to convert the world. She prayed with this end in view for those outside the Church, unfortunately so many in her time, and especially in Umbria; for those without faith and for those Catholics who practiced their religion poorly. She prayed with all her heart that as soon as might be the divine words of Christ have their fulfillment, "Thy Kingdom Come!" And she desired that Jesus should be known by all and by all loved and adored. To prayer she united fasting, scourging and the discipline—and that three times in the day. For her, God was ever present; the thought of Him her mind never lost for a moment; and she went over His divine attributes, one by one; or in sadness and in tears she lost herself in the depths of His sorrows on the Cross. With this meditation, as Saint Bernard tells us, "Her faith was taught and by teaching was illuminated;

and by being illumined was increased, and in its increase was made perfect." This entire ladder of perfection was scaled, step by step, in Rita's soul, full of Faith as it was.

And at the same time with Faith, there sprung up and flourished in her heart Hope most sweet, that virtue that raises up humanity on its troubled voyage across life, for in the same way as a wrecked sailor looks aloft to the stars to get his bearings and to locate the shore, so does man stretch out his arms toward Hope and is encouraged to trust in God. And the hope of Rita was beyond all limit; it found its secure rest not on what she did, but rather on the goodness and the mercy of God; in the infinite merits of the Passion of Jesus; in His precious blood; in the Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin. Over her countenance there was never a cloud to darken her serenity, nor did her heart ever lose its calm and tranquillity, though she was exposed to harsh trials not once but a thousand times. She surrounded herself by her trust in God; she had fixed her heart on the anchor of hope and faced with courage the shock of storms, the vio-

lence of the tempest and the disaster of hurricanes; and whilst everything made shipwreck seem near, fearless and confident she awaited the coming of quiet. As a child that sleeps secure and tranquil near the heart of a mother, so was Rita in her abandonment in the arms of Providence, certain that some day her hope would be crowned in the triumphal conquest of God Himself. Who is there who would not have been broken and crushed after being refused entrance into the Convent three separate times? But Rita had hoped against every earthly hope, and God had worked in wonderful manner for her, changed her sorrow into joy, and in a day that was not far off, the thorns into roses. Here we might note the words of Saint Cyprian, "There is no sorrow in present evils for those who trust and hope only in the good things of the future."

And in the same manner as the flower springs from the stem, so from Faith and from Hope rises Love. To deal adequately with a virtue so noble and so holy one needs the pen of the holy Father Saint Augustine, who has been rightly called "The Doc-

tor of Charity and of Love." "Whosoever has not loved cannot rightly speak of love, nor appreciate its hidden meaning," he says. And continuing he tells us that "bodies, according to their specific gravity, tend to take each one its own place; our specific gravity is determined by the love which we cherish, and it moves us wherever we are moved." And God was the center round which Rita lived with all her soul, with all her heart and with all her mind. Our Saint, so one of the witnesses has declared in the Process, was all aflame with the love of God from her earliest girlhood. Prayer was to her a pleasure, and consideration of God's goodness a delight to her. Her fervor never grew less, but seemed to grow greater even unto death. "Love," says Saint Augustine, "makes things most difficult and arduous easy and trifling." And this Divine Love that burned in the heart of Rita gave her the strength to overcome the most difficult obstacles that stood in the way on her path of perfect living—a path so difficult and in which so many misfortunes pressed her heart, even to the point of breaking—but "love conquers all

things." Rita conquered because her love for God was stronger than any sorrow and greater than any difficulty. Nothing bound her any longer to the world, since she had cast her lot entirely with God. God alone did she seek; of Him alone did she speak; and for Him alone did she live. "God is Love!" exclaims the Evangelist Saint John, "and who lives in love lives in God, and God in him." Rita's ecstasies became so thoroughly a part of her life that she seemed no longer a creature of flesh and blood, but one already amongst the angels, in perfect enjoyment of the bliss of heaven. A soul so beautiful, so thoroughly a lover of God and so perfectly united to Him, maintained its baptismal innocence and certainly never was guilty of sin nor of deliberate fault. But this love of God never remains alone in the human heart, for side by side with it there arises another love—that of one's neighbor; and this latter love is good and holy because, as Saint Augustine notes, "Soul loves soul, even though it sometimes halts at the evils of the body." By means of grace this love is made noble and the love

of one's neighbor becomes one with the love for one's God. In the preceding pages we have seen how the love of Rita for her neighbor spread itself in good works; and of these two loves, in which is the perfection of the law and the prophets, she made two powerful wings by means of which to leave the earth and to hide herself in the Kingdom of God.

Together with the mystic crown of the fundamental virtues which surrounded the soul of Rita there was woven likewise another crown of the cardinal virtues, which are nothing more or less than a development of the former. She was circumspect and prudent in every action; her aim in working was perfect union with God, and every act was so done as to attain that goal, even though the path she traveled was one planted with thorns and briars. Her courage in the cruelest conflicts makes us remember in Rita the woman of character, of which the Canticles speak: "Engirdled with strength and justice," which girdle she was never to put off except on the bed of death. To these virtues she united a temperate sobriety, which

appeared something natural to her spirit; and all those other virtues which produced a splendid richness which was ever alive and never lacking to her conscience, filled as it was with special gifts. In order to understand the marvelous nature of these gifts it is necessary for us to penetrate even more deeply into the hidden life of Rita and in its depths to admire the part she played, the part she chose—that of Magdalen at the feet of the Master.

Well indeed did Rita know how sweet it is to sit at the feet of Jesus Christ and to drink eagerly the words of Life that issued forth from His Divine Lips, and to speak to Him, heart to heart, to pour forth in His presence the most intimate and hidden sorrows and joys of the soul; and her soul, her heart and her mind were delighted in the Lord. Though she was still in this valley of tears, she could repeat with Saint Paul: "My conversation is in the heavens." We admire Rita the child, an angel in her adoration before the altar in her native village, wrapt in an ecstasy of love when she received her First Holy Communion, dedicating her-

self altogether to Jesus. As the years passed her love grew stronger. As wife and mother, without neglecting the duties of her state, she remembered how to keep alive the spiritual fervor in the midst of sorrow and contradictions, which is the mark of privileged souls. Her widowhood she had passed in holy work and in prayer. And now?

The Divine Majesty, the admirable economy of the Incarnation and of the Redemption—the eternal truths—were the books that Rita loved; and with the eye of Faith she read and read without tiring and she raised herself into the most sublime heights of thought on the mysteries of God. The witnesses of the Process tell us that it was a wonderful thing to hear her speak and discourse on God and on His attributes, as though she had studied the most difficult points of Theology, although she was able neither to read nor write. Christ Jesus had stolen the heart of Rita—and He alone possessed it. He had made her heart His heart; and under the white veils of the Eucharist He was for her soul, as He is for all loving hearts, heaven upon earth. How

sweet is the moment, and how dear, in which poor humanity, wearied and afflicted, may remain alone, with Jesus alone, in the Sacrament of Love; for there the Lord, with His flaming heart open, calls unto all, "You that are burdened and heavy laden, come unto Me and I will refresh you." Happy are those hearts that know how to satisfy the unquenchable hunger and thirst in this heavenly banquet! And in truth our Rita had such a heart. So thoroughly was it inflamed with love for the Bread of Angels that the more she partook of that Bread the more she felt new longings and new desires to partake more often. Rather than lose one single Holy Communion she would have preferred to lose life itself; and when in her old age she was broken by sickness and could no longer by herself approach the Holy Table, she seemed transformed into an eager angel of love to those good Sisters who accompanied her and held her in their arms. Her tears and sighs, her groans, her words of affection burst forth as from the heart itself, and she longed for the moment when she should receive from the hands of the

priest Christ Jesus in the Sacrament. And after receiving Him she kept to herself in solitude, remaining often for a long time without other food. She felt not the need of any other, because her soul had been filled with the Bread of Angels. If it were given us to make our way into the sanctuary of the soul of Rita after Holy Communion we would have beheld there an admirable blending of acts of love, of faith, of humility, of adoration, of confidence and of perfect surrender on her part toward God. And Jesus was always her sweet delight in the Most Holy Eucharist; and a thousand times happy was that soul to whom He revealed Himself in the Sacrament of Desire, for here she was dealing not with a portrait, nor with a symbol, nor with a sign, but this was her Jesus, alive and true, such as He is in heaven itself. There indeed on a throne in inaccessible glory, gleaming in the brightness of His divine humanity; but here below on the throne of humility and of infinite love. And Rita meditated on these mysteries so wondrous, and every moment of spare time she passed before the Blessed Sacrament.

Whosoever sought her knew well where to find her.

Rita was happy and blessed in the contemplative love of Christ Jesus, our Sacramental Lord. But how dear it was to her, new Magdalen that she was, languishing with love and with sorrow, to contemplate Him over the altar in His blood, the victim of sin, the crucified Lord, the great Book of Humanity, the mystery that explains every other mystery. Her compassion toward Jesus in His passion was born in her early in life. Her parents, the little house in Roccaporena, her cave on the mountain, brought it always to her mind. The sorrows of Jesus lightened each day the sorrows of Rita, spouse and mother and widow. And now that she had passed to a greater espousal, now that she was become the spouse of the crucified Lord, she felt the need of loving Him beyond all measure, and she was wrapt up in the thought of her afflicted Saviour. The tragedy of Calvary was deeply engraved on her mind and on her heart. And she longed, she desired with all her heart, to share in the sufferings of the Lord.

Everything spoke to her of His sorrows, and everything put her in mind of them. Jesus Christ Crucified formed the one thing dearest to her soul. How many nights without sleep, how many hours did she not pass in the sweet-bitter contemplation of the passion and the death of Christ Jesus! How many times did she scourge herself even unto blood, that she might share in some manner in the sufferings of the God-made man! So thoroughly was she penetrated with those sufferings that often she fainted with the agony of them. Once indeed so long did she remain in this state, that her sisters believed her dead. And dead she could be said to be because no longer she lived, but Christ Jesus in her.

With her love for God there was nourished in the heart of Rita a most tender affection for the most holy Mother of Christ. To her she was most devoted and to all without distinction she used to say, "Do you wish to obtain any favor? Do you wish to save your soul? Say a Hail Mary to the Most Holy Mother and you will obtain that for which you pray." For each of her feast-days she

kept a vigil in fasting with bread and water, with disciplines and with other mortifications; and she longed especially to contemplate the Virgin Mother of Sorrows at the foot of the cross or desolate at the sepulchre of her Son. And in such thought tears of hidden grief would burst forth from her eyes. The devotion toward the Sorrowful Mother has always occupied the attention of every heart that is good and noble. To her compassion for the Dolors of Mary she united sorrow for the pains of the souls in purgatory; and every day in their behalf she scourged herself even to blood, and prayed for them at the time of Communion. She heard Mass for their intention and likewise did she give in large measure of the abundant alms which the faithful brought to her for the needs of the Convent; for the people of Cascia, and of the towns round about, knew well the road to the Monastery of the Magdalen because of the fame of the sanctity which Rita enjoyed. All desired that Rita bless them and pray for them, and never in vain, because Rita prayed; and in answer to her prayers the sick were healed,

the stricken were raised up, sinners returned in sorrow to the Lord and the good persevered in grace each day more. And whilst her prayers ascended in the sight of God to heaven, from it to earth descended in full measure the mercy of God upon those for whom Rita pleaded.

CHAPTER V

RITA SHARES IN CHRIST'S PASSION

TURBULENT indeed is the period of history which wraps itself about that of our Rita. The East was invaded and overrun by the Turks, who put all to fire and slaughter, and like a fearful flood that had burst its banks invaded everywhere and seemed impossible to check. John Paleologus, Emperor of Constantinople, pleaded with the Pope, Eugene IV, whose pontificate began in 1431, to come to the help of his Christian peoples, which were at that point on the brink of ruin. Most serious dangers were overhanging Italy; the Pope was eager to accept the invitation and immediately proclaimed a new crusade. "The Turks," so the Pontiff wrote, "are making captive throngs of men and women which they are carrying away. Christians condemned to slavery are thrown in with the vilest booty and are sold like beasts of burden. Parents are separated from children, brother from

sister, husband from wife. Those who cannot travel because of age or infirmity are slain on the streets in the midst of cities. These invaders are not disturbed by the innocence of childhood and they put to the sword infant victims that began but yesterday to live, who knowing no fear, smile in the face of their murderer as he delivers the mortal stroke. Every Christian family is compelled to give its children to the Emperor of the Turks, as in other days the people of Athens gave to the monster of Crete. Wheresoever the Turks have penetrated, fields are bare, cities lose their laws and their industries, the Christian religion has no longer priests nor altars, humanity no longer aid nor asylum." With this detailed proclamation, the Pope urged both princes and people to come to the aid of the Kingdom of Cypress, the island of Rhodes and of Constantinople, which was in special manner the last bulwark of the West against the invaders.

But unfortunately the holy enthusiasm which in other days animated kings, emperors and Christian peoples was gone.

Nations no longer felt the strong Faith which in other days had pushed men on by the millions to take up arms and to hasten to the liberation of the holy sepulchre. Now, instead, internal discord had broken the nerve and had torn the vital interests of the West. Notwithstanding this, the Pontiff sent through Europe zealous apostles to preach the crusade. Amongst the preachers against the Turks there was a certain Brother James of Montebrandone, of the Franciscans, a man filled with holy zeal and with rarest virtues. For many years he had been a missionary in Bosnia and in Hungary. Afterwards he was commissioned to preach in the territory of Aquileia the crusade against Amurat II, who had penetrated into Hungary at the head of sixty thousand soldiers. The great John Uniad, one of the noblest characters of the century, opposed the Turk like a wall of bronze, resisted the shock of his armies and broke completely the forces of Amurat. After his return from this mission, Brother James was ordered to make his way through the territory of Spoleto, which was part of the Papal States, preaching the

gospel to the cities and towns of that section of Italy.

According to some accounts it would seem that the holy Franciscan arrived at the castle of Cascia the Sunday after Easter. The good name of his zeal and of his holy life had preceded him and the gathering of people to hear the word of the celebrated preacher was immense. The parochial church was too small to hold the throng. It was necessary that he preach in the public market-place, and so great was his spirit and his apostolic fervor that sinners the most hardened turned from their path of life to do penance, and no one left the sermons with dry eyes. The Religious of the Magdalen were not slow in taking advantage of this opportunity both for themselves and for the sake of their good example to the people; and Rita was there first amongst the eager throng to hear the word of God. One day the sacred orator took as his text the theme of Christ's love in His Passion. Browned by days spent in camp and field, gaunt and worn from the privations of a warrior's life, but unbroken in his zeal, the preacher

stretched forth his strong hands and pleaded with his hearers. "For how many should Christ's sorrows be in vain? And yet Paul the Apostle of the Gentiles had expressly said that in his own sufferings he desired to fill out that which was lacking to the Passion of Christ. Bold words even for an Apostle! Who was there in Cascia that would, like Paul, endeavor to fill out the full measure of Christ's sorrows, who would share in the agony of that crowned Head, who would make a living sacrifice and share in the suffering of but a single thorn? Surely there would be some one ready to lift up from the forehead of Christ the weight of one of the smallest of the thorns!"

This was the ideal of Rita and she hung on the preacher's every word. Her soul rejoiced in that sermon and her heart drank in, like a deer that is thirsty, large draughts at the fount of the wounds of the Saviour. And a strong flame was enkindled by the words of the missionary in the heart of Rita, an intense desire, a love that she could not express, toward our dear Jesus crucified for our sakes. Her two eyes be-

came two fountains of tears and her heart beat strongly in her breast. How ardently did she long to partake and to suffer even a little part in the agony of the Lord! Once the sermon was over she made her way back to the Monastery. There was a Crucifix painted on the wall of the oratory near the church, beautiful and intensely devotional. And Rita saw it and her heart was wrapt in it; and moved in contemplation of the Man of Sorrows she fell there at the foot of the Crucifix, fixed her eyes on the forehead crowned with thorns. What did she say? What did she do? This we can scarcely imagine, much less describe. But a luminous ray set forth from the thorny crown of the Crucified One, carrying with it the pointed thorn, which fixed itself in the forehead of Rita with such force as to penetrate the bone of the forehead, bringing with it most awful pain. And the body of Rita could not bear the torment, and in a swoon she fell at the feet of the Crucified One. But love conquered pain and the angels raised her up and in her ear resounded the words of the psalmist: "Come ye forth, O daugh-

ters of Sion! Come to behold my beloved in the crown with which she had been crowned in the day of her happiness and in the day of the joy of her heart." The wound which this thorn produced never healed—more than that, it spread itself, deforming the white forehead of the Saint. Within, it was a mass of corruption and from it a stench spread; about it a heap of nauseating worms swarmed. For fifteen years this wound in the forehead tortured Rita—that is to say, till the moment of her death.

She did not wish to be a burden to her sisters in religion and she took up her life apart in her own little room, tranquil and contented, bearing everything for the love of God. But in so much as the humility and the refinement of Rita made her eager to hide herself from the eyes of all, the love and kindness of her sisters urged them to visit her and to be forever with her. And when they saw the worms falling from her forehead they used to urge her to use a means of cure in order to keep from her these repulsive things, but Rita with a smile would respond, "These, dear sisters, are lit-

tle angels, all mine own." The more she hid herself from the eyes of the world, the more she revealed herself to the eyes of God, taking occasion from this retreat to render continued thanks to the Lord for a gift so great, to practice always more humility, patience and resignation and to give forth her feelings of love toward her Spouse, the Crucified Jesus. This most singular Largess of Christ Jesus to His faithful servant, this thorn of sorrow one day was to be turned into a rose of the spring-time. The disgust and the stench were to be transmuted into the odor of the sweetness of Paradise and to be spread even down centuries long distant. Entire peoples, held spellbound by its sweetness, would be brought to the miraculous body of Rita and the infallible voice of the Pontiff in Rome would proclaim this odor which should spread from her holy body supernatural in character. Together with the other miracles of grace it would serve to surround the forehead of the poor Sister of Cascia with the glorious aureola of the Saints who had gained the Kingdom of Heaven.

In this period of time there is another gap of eight years in the story of our Rita, during which she lived altogether unknown to the eyes of mortal man, leading a hidden life with Christ in God, attending with all her heart to her own sanctification. And in that time great deeds were done in the world —religious and political.

The East, always so agitated by religious and civil difficulties, all at once seemed to have returned as though by a miracle to calm and quiet. The famous Greek Schism seemed ready to be extinguished forever in the Council of Florence, through the care of the Roman Pontiff—Eugene IV; the people who had fallen away brought back once more within the bosom of the Latin Church. But the treachery and wickedness of Mark of Ephesus rendered vain every agreement. And the monks of the East shouted forth: "Give us rather the turban of the Turk than the hood of the Latins," and in short time the prayer was to be heard —but at what a price! As a matter of fact, the Turk continued in his destruction of the Christians in the Far East, and filled with

the lust of conquest was threatening even Italy. In vain did the Christian people of the East seek to oppose and to build a dike of human bodies against the torrent that was pouring upon them. It was an impetuous, an overwhelming stream that inundated everything; nor was it stopped until it had poured its floods over the capital of the empire of the East—Constantinople. And then in a single stroke, eleven centuries of civilization were buried in the ferocious barbarity of Mohammed II.

And the West was in scarcely better condition. It was agitated by civil wars between state and state, which were fanned up by the ambition of foreigners and of native sons; and to these facts there was to be counted a life amongst men of the Church which was filled with causes for sorrow and for scandal. In Basel, a handful of wilful men shouted forth that the true Pontiff Eugene was deposed and by another election they placed in his stead a man named Amadeus, Duke of Savoy, who took the name of Felix V. These were days truly sad for the Church and for society. How-

ever, the storm which had grown over the vineyard of the Lord seemed to have spent itself in Italy. Eugene IV, after sixteen years of stormy pontificate, died in the odor of sanctity; and to him there succeeded Thomas Parentucelli, under the name of Nicholas V, a man of striking genius who had earned applause in the Church, and in the world of letters, where he was called the Augustus of the Middle Ages. Amadeus renounced his claim to the papacy and finally, after long years of schism and of war, the olive branch was planted in Italy and over the rest of Western Europe.

The heavy rumors of wars, of the schism and of these scandals that agitated the Church and the world had reached Rita, separated though she was not only from the world, but even from her sisters in religion; and she wept bitter tears and redoubled her prayers and her penances that God might be merciful and might grant the peace so much desired by the nations of the earth. And her heart exulted when she learnt that the schism was over and the war was done with,

and that the Pontiff Nicholas V had proclaimed the Jubilee Year.

It was 1450. And this Jubilee which had been ordered by the Pontiff was made glorious above every other by the extraordinary gathering of the faithful in Rome. Manetti, cited by the celebrated historian, Audisius, in his life of this Pontiff tells us that the multitudes seemed like the armies of ants or of bees. And a holy desire to gain the indulgences of the Jubilee was born in the heart of Rita, and much more did it increase when she was told that her sisters were preparing for the journey to the Capital of the World. But she had never left her cell except to receive Holy Communion, and now prostrate before her Superior, she asked permission to go with her sisters on the holy pilgrimage. But the Superior did not deem it either opportune or prudent to grant the permission that had been asked, because of the terrible wound in Rita's forehead; and, laughing, she answered her: "Go back for the present to your cell; see if you can heal in the few days that remain the wound on your forehead, and then I will grant the permission

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you ask." But Rita was not at all disturbed by this refusal. She returned to her cell, threw herself at the foot of her Crucifix and asked of her dear Jesus that He should make hidden the gift of the thorn. Jesus heard the voice of His faithful servant and the wound disappeared at once. And Rita knew how wonderful a thing it is to keep hidden the gift of the Lord; and she sought to hide the wonder that had been worked. She promptly attributed its cure to a certain medicine which she alone knew. But what was done by God was so thoroughly manifested that the Superior hesitated no longer in granting her permission to go.

And now the faithful little band, the holy caravan from the Magdalen in Cascia, sets out afoot; making its way down the mountains of Umbria to Rome. After receiving Communion the chosen Sisters were given the kiss of peace by the Mother Abbess, and in the clear light of the morning they started out from the Convent gate. The entire town followed in their train. A pilgrimage in those days was the dream of a lifetime. No one remained at home but

those that duty or necessity compelled to stay. The spring planting was over, the herds on the mountain-side would be watched by the elders of the village. God would take care of their homes till they returned. Down the white road they went, chanting the hymns of praise, reciting the litanies, and saying the rosary, a joyous, happy throng. In the heat of the day they rested by the roadside, in the early afternoon the march was again resumed. The loud ringing of the iron-shod staffs on the hard rocks made echoes that the mountains to the right and left repeated and repeated. From Cascia to Serra Valle, then a turn to the left on the highroad to Spoleto. It was a continuous stream of marching hosts from the Castelli, the walled towns on the heights that skirted the road from Norcia to Spoleto—the famous mountain towns ever at variance one with the other unless moved to meet a common enemy or to take part in a pilgrimage. And at Spoleto another turn to the left into the Via Flaminia, the road built by the Roman Emperors in the great days of ancient Rome, and a hun-

dred miles to the Imperial City. Over mountains and valleys they went until the day when they came to the vast level stretches of the Roman Campagna. Rome in the distance beckoned them on.

Rita made her way amidst her sisters. Sixty-nine years of life were already hers, but the eyes that looked brightly and clearly before her were the eyes of a girl of eighteen. And the smile through which her pearly white teeth peeped was a benediction on those that were with her. The heavy pilgrim's cloak and the staff were no burden to her. She was going to Rome—holy Rome, the center of the Church, the home of the Vicar of Jesus Christ, who had opened unto her the blessed streams of the holy indulgences for the remission of her sins and the sins of the world. She was to go to Rome—to the Holy City—where everything speaks in eloquent tongue of the new Kingdom of Christ which was planted on the foundations of the Apostles; which was sealed in the blood of the martyrs; which was to triumph over the kingdom of Satan. And in these meditations, in prayer and in holy

song, she arrived at Rome, entered the gate of the city and knelt in thanksgiving in the church of her Order, that of St. Mary of the People, at the very gate of the city.

How can we describe the sentiments which filled the heart of Rita when she set foot in the Metropolis of the Christian world? She hastened then to venerate the sepulchre of the Apostles, Peter and Paul, repeating their credo and filling out the duties required for the gaining of the indulgences of the Jubilee. In gazing on those places where the heroes of our Faith rest; in kissing their tombs; in prostrating herself before their ashes and the instruments of their martyrdom, the heart of Rita desired and ardently longed to spill its blood and to give its life in proof of her Faith; and in holy emotion she envied them their happy lot. All Rome spoke to her of faith, of sanctity and of love; and when her body recalled her to the sense of its rights, then she begged on the street—that poor woman of Christ Jesus—for her sisters and for herself.

Weighty writers of the life of Rita affirm that her deportment in its humility was

noted by all the throngs at Rome; and that it attracted attention, so much so, that the good report of it reached the ear of the Pontiff, who wished to see Rita on her pilgrimage, and to strengthen her with his fatherly benediction; and she in confusion, and in humble thanksgiving protested her devotion to Christ's representative on earth. And Rita's soul was made more beautiful and richer for the indulgences which she gained. Soon she left Rome, never to return. However, there was a day to come when in the Eternal City her name should be magnified.

Four centuries and a half afterward in the world-joy of another Jubilee, the year 1900, another great Pontiff, Leo XIII, in the majestic basilica of Saint Peter, bent low in prayer before the image of the humble Augustinian Nun, Rita of Cascia, whose name he had written solemnly in letters of gold in the album of the Saints; and her name resounded glorious on the lips of full eighty thousand people, gathered together under the great cupola of Michael Angelo; whilst on the swift wings of the telegraph

the glory of her name was spread through the entire world.

After eight or ten days of travel afoot, our pilgrims found themselves back in Cascia, and Rita, even though the journey had for its purpose devotion to the Lord, none the less desired eagerly to hide herself once more in her little cell. And when she arrived there, the wound in the forehead was re-opened, wherefore she was compelled once again to take a little room apart from the other Sisters, leaving them in wonder at what had been done unto her. And in the meantime the good report of her virtues and of her supernatural gifts that were spreading far and wide attracted to the Monastery persons of all conditions in search of favors at the hands of Rita. And she worked for them various wonderful deeds. A man who was possessed was freed from his illness; another, crippled with rheumatism and bent almost in two, was given strength to walk erect; a little girl who was seriously ill was brought back to health. Her mother had come to Sister Rita to obtain the grace of a cure of her child, and the servant of the

Lord at the sight of her grief was herself moved. "Go!" she said, "your child is cured."

Rita healed others whilst she herself suffered ever more intensely, and as the time approached when she was about to leave earth for heaven it seemed as though God, the Supreme Worker, wished to make perfect and to work out His masterpiece in the soul of Rita; wherefore, not only did He increase the pain in the wound on her forehead, but He added moreover still another infirmity which held her almost for four years nailed to the poor couch which she consented to use only through the expressed command of her Superior. The Lord Jesus, with illnesses He sent and Rita with penance and mortification, working one with the other, raised to the highest perfection that soul so holy of the handmaid of the Lord. She was resigned as an angel would be to the Divine Will and her only discomfort was the thought that she might be a burden to her sisters. Often did she say to them: "Bear up with me for the love of God, for I see well that this Convent gets nothing

from me except worries and trouble." And to this there was still a greater agony which weighed down her heart—and it was the thought that she could not receive Holy Communion as frequently as she wished. She was confounded with humility when to her in her humble cell the Lord was brought, at the thought that she could not go to Him. But what happiness was hers at the approach of the Sacramental Jesus! Her heart beat with all the intensity of its love and tears without ceasing made their way down her worn cheeks. Rita was transformed, and after she had received Jesus in her heart frequently was wrapt in sweetest ecstasy, languishing with love for her Lord and God. And she sighed and lamented; and to Jesus often did she repeat those words of Paul: "I long to be free from this body of death, to be united with Thee."

It was the very heart of the wintertime and over the lofty Apennines the north-wind blew with its snows that cover in white the mountains and valleys of Cascia. One of Rita's relatives from Roccaporena had come to visit the holy woman and as she was about

to take her leave asked of Rita if there was anything she wished from her native village. Rita thanked her and then added, "Since you are so kind, I ask you for the love of God to go down into the garden of our house and pick a rose there and bring it to me." Her relative laughed at her, and turned to the Sisters with a smile which meant that Rita was delirious. Roses in the depth of winter! But she promised to do the favor for the holy woman and took her leave. When she reached Roccaporena what wonder was hers to see in the old-time garden of Rita, in the very heart of the freezing snow, a rose stem on which a beautiful rose in full bloom bowed its head, rich in its green leaves and in its buds. She was surprised and she plucked the rose and she hurried, nor did she cease her haste until she had arrived at Cascia, bringing with her for Rita the wonder-flower of the Saint. And Rita thanked her for the gift and blessed the good Lord, ever kind and merciful; and her sisters in amazement admired the deed and exalted the beauty and the fragrant sweetness of Rita's flower. The thorn of

Rita's forehead merited the rose from the garden. And winter followed with all its snows, with its biting north-winds; and Rita remained there on that poor little couch awaiting always with calm and resignation her call home.

There was still another strange happening which increased the fame of her holiness. That cousin, who a short time before had brought her a rose, once more asked her if there was something she might bring from Roccaporena. And again Rita answered, "Yes; in your goodness I beg you to go into our garden there and bring me some figs." This time her cousin did not smile nor did she hesitate. She made no remark that Rita was in delirium as she had done before, sure that the invisible power that had granted to her eyes to see a flower blooming in the midst of winter, could certainly now give her even full-blown figs. And so it happened. Whilst all the garden was stiffened and crackling in the cold, from the fig-tree a single branch stood forth heavy in leaves and bearing ripe, fresh figs, such kind as Autumn the bountiful brings to us. And

once more she hastened to Rita with the fruit in her hands; and Rita thanked her for such goodness and love. She partook of the figs and gave of them to her sisters. Through the obedience of Rita, an arid branch was turned in God's own good time into a flourishing vine which gave forth sweetest grapes. And now the earth, covered with snow, gave flowers and fruits as proof of her sanctity. The news of these wonders spread far and wide. Many persons saw them, and still more heard of them; and all were convinced of Rita's power with God. The number of those who sought her bedside to venerate God's goodness and to ask her prayers increased, not only from Cascia, but likewise from the neighboring towns. No one left her without being promised a share in her prayers. For all of them Rita had a word of comfort, and when they left that little room they felt happy and consoled, raised up at the sight and by the words of the holy woman. And yet a little time she had to remain upon this earth. Already did Rita feel that the day was not far in which she should loose forever the bonds which

held her, and her soul free on the wings of love should make its way to God. Only this did she desire; only that day did she long for. And now amidst the snow-capped mountains the spring smiled once more round about Rita's couch.

One day, all of a sudden, the poor room of Rita was filled with splendor and her face, which had been saddened by the sadness of many years, brightened with a joy above that which human hearts may feel. Her arms stretched out towards that place whence the light seemed to come most strongly. When Rita recovered from this ecstasy and was questioned by the Superior, she humbly made answer that the Saviour and His Immaculate Mother had come to her and had told her, "Within three days—Paradise." And a holy happiness, a calm not of this earth, spread over her face, for she was ready and eager for the great journey. She had been strengthened by the Sacraments of the Church, the words of whose minister she repeated with tears of sorrow and of tender goodness. She asked pardon and forgave; she blest the Sisters who had lived with her

and asked of them a memory in their prayers, promising to be ever with them before the throne of the Most High. And she felt near at hand the supreme moment. She held more closely to her heart the Crucifix that she loved; and with her eyes fixed toward heaven, her soul in its beautiful goodness took its flight to Paradise. It was the night between Saturday and Sunday —the twenty-second of May, the year of grace, 1457; on the Chair of Peter, Callixtus III was reigning; Rita was seventy-six years of age, of which forty-one were passed in the Cloister in Cascia.

CHAPTER VI

WHAT DEATH BROUGHT TO RITA

RITA wended her way to heaven and at the same time through the still night the bells of the Monastery and of the castle of Cascia rang out in jubilee and in great joy though untouched by mortal hands. Her poor cell was cloaked with vivid splendor and an odor, sweet with the sweetness of Paradise, spread through all the Monastery. The wound which was produced by the thorn and which at other times inspired disgust all at once was changed into a sign of election; and her body, worn and poor through fast and penance, took on a beauty that was not of this earth. News of the death and of the wonders which accompanied it spread without delay through Cascia and the surrounding country. From every part throngs came to venerate and to kiss the blessed corpse and to have from Cascia some token of remembrance. Amongst those who came there was that relative of Saint Rita who had brought to

the servant of God the roses and the figs during the winter before. In the excess of her affection and of her sorrow she embraced the sacred body of Rita with tears and with kisses. Her arm, which up to that time had been paralyzed, regained feeling and strength. She was cured! All round about shouted out the good news. Enthusiasm lent wings to the glad tidings and pilgrimages began, so much so that the Sisters were compelled to leave the sacred body exposed for a long time to the veneration and to the pious curiosity of those who had come to show their affection. Afterward they began to consider how and where they should bury Rita. And whilst they deliberated that a coffin suitable for her should be made they sought about to find a workman for the purpose. A certain skilled cabinet-maker—Cecco Barbaro of Cascia—was there present with others. He turned to the Sisters and said to them, "Were I able, with all my heart should I make the casket." He had lost the use of his hands several years before. The nimbleness of his fingers was restored at the moment. Happy and grateful toward

his holy benefactress, forthwith he prepared himself for the work and made not one casket but two.

The inner coffin in which the body was placed is of cedar wood, and this the builder covered with glass and with an iron mesh screen; the other was intended as a casing for the first. It was of walnut with a cover which was fitted in ordinary coffin shape. This casing is of singular importance, not only because of the skill of the workman, but likewise because of the character of his work. Upon its cover there is carved on the wood the life-size figure of Saint Rita, vested in the Habit of her Order. The lines and contour of the face are clearly marked; the eyes closed; the wound in the forehead shown; the hands crossed over the breast; the feet sandaled, stretching out beneath the folds of the Habit. The head rests on a cushion with embroidered flowers and about the head in a white background is an invocation in which Rita is called "Blessed," and in which her sufferings, both from the husband of her younger days and from the thorn in her maturer years, are recounted. There is like-

wise the date of her precious death—1457. The side of the coffin too is painted in three panels—in the center a Pièta, on the left Saint Mary Magdalen bearing in her hands the alabaster vase with its precious ointment, and on the right Saint Rita in the habit of the Augustinians, with the wound on her forehead and the thorn in her right hand. Her head is crowned round with bright rays.

We refuse to be numbered amongst those who believe so fully the claims of modern science to omniscience that they deny the possibility of miracles. Merely because some men of science assert that beyond matter and force that can be tested and measured there is nothing, we are not going to forget that the same God who in the beginning created matter and force gave them their laws and established their limits, still guides His creatures in His Provident Keeping. Merely because a scientific explanation cannot be given for a fact, we do not think that therefore the fact must be denied. Many of the simplest things in life look to science for the answer to the question "Why,"—for a reason, an explanation; and

look in vain, yes, things so simple that they appear childish. Why does the robin redbreast hop, the snipe on the seashore walk? Why does the maple-tree secrete a sweet wholesome sap, the nightshade growing in the same soil and living in the same elements a deadly poison? Why does a silver coin ring? Why is a lead piece mute? Alcohol dissolves resin, water dissolves gums, why do liquids dissolve anything, and what is the reason for this particular preference? And there are a thousand such facts for which science has no answer—facts which scientists do not deny.

But on the other hand we are not so imprudent as to declare everything that someone would call miraculous a miracle. Extraordinary facts in the devotion of St. Rita are by no means rare, not even in our land and in our day. Are these extraordinary events all miraculous? The answer is clearly: "No." Many of them can be easily explained by purely natural means as definite results to be attributed to well-known natural causes, operating along lines that science recognizes. In this regard as Catholics

we give to every extraordinary event simply that weight which the Church gives it. But cannot all these extraordinary events be explained by the operation of a natural force hitherto unknown? And the answer again is clearly: "No." Granted that such a force did exist, would the clients of the Saint know of it any more than the rest of mankind? Nor would they know how to set it in motion any more than the rest of men! Again, why should this force operate for them and not for others who believe in its existence? Is it going to operate for them because they deny its existence? Most assuredly not. We are confident, therefore, that many of the favors that have been granted by God to those that interceded with Rita of Cascia have for their explanation no natural cause.

The most ancient writers on the life of Rita tell us that the sepulchre was almost immediately surrounded by votive offerings of silver, of wax and of paintings. Hung upon the walls were the iron chains of slaves from Tripoli; crutches and canes, knives and swords—a thousand things in memory of favors granted. At the tomb happened

a series of cures, for the blind who recovered their sight, for the wounded who received perfect health, for those under the power of evil spirits who were freed, for men condemned to death who were pardoned. And in consequence of these marvelous favors the people began to call Rita "Saint," and the Monastery which had been named in honor of the Magdalen was rebaptized with the name of Saint Rita. This name it keeps even to our day.

But it does not seem right to deprive the reader of the narration of some of these remarkable events which took place in the days that followed the death of Rita. Hardly three days after the death of this holy woman of Cascia, on the 25th of May, 1457, a certain Baptist de Angelo, moved by the fame of the wonders, came to Cascia from Colgiacone. He was totally blind. With faith he placed his hand upon the tomb of the Saint and began his prayers for the gift of sight, and this favor was granted to him on the instant. On the same day Lucretia of Forcella, weighed down with the burden of years and ill with dropsy, was brought by

her friends in pilgrimage to the sepulchre of the Saint. After a few moments of prayer she likewise touched the sacred body and returned home freed from her illness. Shortly afterwards, in the presence of a large gathering, a deaf mute, five years old, from the same town, regained hearing and speech. On the twenty-ninth of the month, Salimene Antonio, from Poggio, who had a finger of his hand rendered useless through paralysis, touched the coffin of the Saint and was immediately cured.

The writers of the life of Rita have builded up catalogues, I might say without end, of the miracles that have been performed through the intercession of the Saint. And in the same way as a small stream develops into a rushing river, so it may be said that the fame of the Nun of Cascia, so humble and so hidden in life, was destined after death to grow to immense proportions. In fact, her fame spread and her name for goodness in granting favors for those that invoke her, so much so that today after four centuries we behold the entire Catholic world enthusiastic at the name of Saint Rita

of Cascia, turning to her with devotion and faith, and so thoroughly sure of her valiant help that she is called frequently by no other name than this: "Saint Rita—Saint of the Impossible!" This glorious title was given her for the first time in Cadiz in Spain, even before her canonization. The people of that city thought and still think that nothing was impossible to her,—that moreover her aid would be the more certain the more pronounced the difficulties to be encountered.

Marvelous and not at all in the ordinary run of lives was the life of Rita of Cascia. From the cradle to her grave, and thence, if we may judge by the present,—till the day of Resurrection,—her life has been a continued succession of heavenly favors. The grace of God went before her in benediction in that she was born of a mother that had been childless even till old age; called by the name of a flower, there was foretold that perfume of sweetness that she was to scatter from her virtues and the odor that she was to give from her grave. The bees made festival of her birth; and the gates of the Monastery were miraculously

opened unto her. Christ Jesus gave a thorn from His crown of thorns, and after death her body became resplendent in glory and vested in beauty above the measure of human beauty. In place of the deathlike gray there was youth; where there should have been nothing except food for the worms—there was a smile and a perfume as though from Heaven itself. God wished as He actually does wish to glorify His servant in that body which she had sought to make suffer so much, and to render glorious the sepulchre of Rita, for the body of the Saint remains even to our day incorrupt.

Those witnesses who examined the body first describe it for us as that of one who sleeps; and this first investigation was for the beatification in 1626—157 years after the death of Rita. It was made by the delegates of the Bishop of Spoleto.

In their testimony under oath are the following words: "Afterwards the coffin, or rather the sepulchre of wood in which there lies the above-named servant of God—Rita—was opened." They then describe the wooden coffin in every particular, speaking

of the inscription of which several words were indecipherable because of the antiquity of the writing and because through the wear and tear of time the characters could not be recognized. And they add: "The body of the servant of God appears as though she had died but recently; and one sees there the flesh, white, consumed in no place; the forehead; the eyes with their lashes; the nose; the mouth; the chin; the entire face—all so well conditioned and whole as not to differ in any particular from those who live today. There appear likewise yet whole and intact the white veils which she was accustomed to wear over her head, exactly like the veils that the other Sisters of this Convent wear here and now, which veils make it impossible for us to see the wound which she had from the crucified Lord. And in the same way you can see her hands, white and firm, so that it is possible to count the fingers with their finger-nails as one can see them in the bodies of those recently dead; and the same is true of her feet, which are sandaled." The same account is given by the author of the Italian version of the official Lives of the Saints by

the Bollandists: "Not only in that sacred body is there not lacking a single particle, even of the tips of the toes, the fingers or the nose, but more than that one hundred and eighty years after her death the live color of her face is such that it seems rather the face of one who sleeps and not that of one who has died." It is not given to us to investigate the wonderful design of God nor to penetrate His inscrutable ends, but rather to give Him thanks that He has preserved the sweet body of the Saint for our veneration.

In 1629 the body of the Saint remained with eyes opened and was seen to raise herself from the coffin in which she rested. The eyes of the Blessed remained opened, whilst before that time they had been closed, as one may see from the pictures that were made before that time. And it certainly must excite wonder that a dead body—even that of a Saint—should after one hundred and fifty years open its eyes or close them! Much more the wonder that this body should move and turn from side to side as though Rita still lived! The first writers of the life of

our Saint Rita speak of these things as of ordinary affairs. Some of them were ocular witnesses of what occurred; and the Nuns in the convent gave testimony under oath of the fact that these things were repeated under various circumstances. The elevation of her body would happen within the old casket in such manner that her face touched the screen of wire that enclosed the top of the coffin, and this happened each year on her feast-day—the twenty-second of May. It was repeated when the Bishop of Spoleto and the heads of the Order came to Cascia to venerate the body; and this same elevation which continued for a longer time was to be remarked in the year 1703; as though she was eager to warn the people of the terrible misfortune that hung over them when on the fourteenth of January of that same year, about two o'clock in the morning, a violent earthquake sent Cascia and the towns round about crashing down in ruins—though the Monastery and the Church of Saint Rita remained untouched. These movements of the holy body of Rita are described by the official witness for the canonization of the

Blessed. He says: "Many persons who have been questioned from the time of the first Process in 1626 and again successively in 1739, in 1751, and even at the time of the writing, 1893, give testimony to have seen the body of Saint Rita move. Other persons tell the same story on the testimony of trustworthy witnesses. Amongst the first class, some there are who say that they saw with their own eyes her head turned toward the people; according to some, the body raised itself to the top of the urn; and some moreover note the fact that her Habit was moved and disordered; and some add to the facts of sight the facts of hearing." And this is not enough. Wonder was added to wonder! Besides the opening of the eyes, the raising of the body, a fragrance was likewise to be noted, which emanates from the body of Saint Rita. Here we are not dealing with an ordinary perfume such as flowers give, or chemical compounds—this odor is altogether different, altogether individual, and such that it sweetly strengthens the soul and gives life to the heart. At times it is perceived

near the sepulchre and at times again at a far distance; sometimes within the Monastery, sometimes outside of it, in the near neighborhood of the church; along the roads and in the houses at Cascia; then again sometimes it is perceived in the day—other times during the hours at night. It would seem as though the dear Saint Rita was prodigal in her favors, these little favors to her clients; and especially in those moments when she grants other favors they ask. And this cannot be understood to be a case of a wide auto-suggestion, because the odor has been perceived by persons who were unwilling to believe in anything miraculous whatsoever. Of this miracle of Saint Rita, the author who has been quoted above, writes as follows: "Not only do witnesses with perfect accord, but likewise well-founded report, speak of an odor of sweetness issuing from the body of Blessed Rita, and moreover from objects which have touched the holy body. No one seems to be able to classify this fragrance; they simply say it is not of this world. It has been perceived beyond the limits of church and Convent; it grows

ST. RITA'S DEATH

at times as one draws near the church and spreads even to the farthest quarters of the Convent. It does not depend on sweet spices placed in the body of the Saint—there are none; nor can it be accounted for by flowers within the church. In this church flowers that carry perfume are not used, so that no one might declare that in the flowers the fragrance found an explanation. The intensity of this fragrance, its spread, its prevalence in every century make this quite a different matter from the fragrance which at some times and in various places has marked the presence of the relics of the Saints. For these reasons," he concludes, "and from a hundred others which have their basis in the character of the witnesses that have testified, I do not hesitate to declare that the fragrance emanating from the body of Blessed Rita is supernatural—in other words, a miracle."

To this conclusion Pope Leo XIII gave the approval of pontifical authority when he declared the fragrance one perceives near the body of Saint Rita to be miraculous.

The silent virtues of Rita proved themselves eloquent by the continued favors that

were operated through her prayer and intercession. The people were attracted by these and turned to her with faith, confident that their prayers would be heard by Rita after death as they had been in her lifetime. Veneration to her had no limits. And her sepulchre was the goal of pilgrimages not only from places in the province of Umbria, but likewise from the farthest borders of the Italian Peninsula. The coffin in which her body lay was surrounded by lamps, by candles and by votive offerings; and her fame in aiding those who had recourse to her spread far and wide. When the first anniversary of her happy death, May 22nd, came, they began to celebrate her feast-day, and the Church of the Magdalen in Cascia was too small to hold the large number of those who hastened there. They began to establish a new real festival and both Monastery and church from that time on were called by her name. And yet the Catholic Church did not yet sanction by its authority the devotion to the Nun of Cascia.

In 1623 Maffei Barberine took his place on the throne of St. Peter with the name of

Urban VIII. He had been the Bishop of Spoleto and had visited Cascia frequently. He knew the fame of the wonders which the Lord had worked through His servant Rita. In the first year of his Pontificate he ordered Monsignor Castrucci, then Bishop of that See, to begin the Process in the case of Rita and to investigate her life and her miracles, expressing at the same time a lively desire to see her name written midst the names that the Church calls "Blessed" When the sacred tribunal had been established for this purpose, the Process of the Blessed was completed within six months and was sent to the Sacred Congregation of Cardinals, which Congregation recognized the truth of the fact that public devotion had been paid to Rita as shown by the documents. Accordingly, to the Augustinian Order and to the Diocese of Spoleto the Office and the Mass of Blessed Rita were granted on the second of October, 1627. This privilege was likewise granted to every priest who on Saint Rita's feast-day should be celebrating Mass in a church of the Order. And four months afterwards, on demand of the

Duke of Modena, this privilege was granted to the priests of his Dukedom. The joy of the people was indeed great in hearing that the devotion to Saint Rita had been officially approved. And on July 16, 1628, in St. Augustine's Church in Rome, there was kept a solemn feast, in the presence of the dignitaries of the Papal Court, the nobility of Rome and an immense throng which crowded the entire church. And there the Pontifical Decree was read and Rita was raised solemnly to the title of "Blessed" and to the honors of the altar. But this was nearly one hundred and seventy-five years after the death of Rita.

From the day on which Rita departed this life even to our own time, devotion toward her has been spread by the Augustinians,—members of the Order to which she belonged. The Augustinian Missionaries of Spain, who were the first to spread the gospel in the unexplored regions of Mexico and of the Philippines, took with them their devotion to the heroine of Cascia. They founded churches and chapels under her protection, and about these rose towns and cities which

in turn were called by her name. There are fourteen places called Saint Rita in the Philippines. And this devotion likewise spread to Peru, in the Argentine and in Brazil. Here splendid churches have been dedicated to Rita and there are many associations erected under her patronage. All of them are doing good work for her people. And this was the case in regions far from Italy. Much the more did love for Rita show itself in Europe. No one wrote of her without calling her "Blessed" or "Saint." The Superiors in her Order, in their official letters, used this title and also the writers who wrote of her and of her Monastery.

Such, indeed, was the widespread report of the favors she granted, that many illustrious men and women eagerly longed to visit Cascia, even under difficulties, to venerate the tomb of the servant of God,—rulers and cardinals, priests and bishops, and among the latter, Bishop Mastai, of Spoleto, who was afterwards Pope Pius IX. The Kings of Spain and of Portugal, when Spain and Portugal were world powers, were especially noted for their devotion to Rita. Mari-

anna, of the Bourbons, the Queen of Charles the II, wrote frequently to the Sisters of Cascia in thanks for the relics that had been sent to her. And she asked for the prayers of the Sisters at the tomb of Saint Rita in behalf of herself, her husband and their kingdom. And Charles II wrote to the Viceroy in Naples, and instructed him that he should build a magnificent coffin in which the body of the Saint might rest, and he sent to Cascia large gifts of money and artistic works. And the neighboring kingdom of Portugal followed closely her neighbor, Spain, in devotion to the Saint. John V built a new wing to the Monastery and there today the royal arms are displayed. He gave likewise a silver urn as thanks-offering for a favor received. Charles III, of Sardinia, stands forth likewise in the number of those of royal blood to whom Rita was dear. The veneration of the Saint took deep root in Sardinia. Altars are erected in her honor and her feast-day is kept with marked solemnity.

The Pontiffs favored it, we might say, even before they officially pronounced it

acceptable to the Church. In 1614, Pope Paul V authorized the Papal Governor in Cascia to have a standard made which would be carried in the Procession of the Saint every Saint Rita's day. And this standard was carried in the city of Rome on the occasion of the jubilee of Clement V, attended by many pilgrims from Cascia. At that time there happened a fact that is well worth recording. A commission of cardinals was gathered together at one of the gates of Rome, many other prelates and a multitude of people, when a sudden rainstorm held up the procession. But scarcely had the standard of Saint Rita been raised than the rain ceased as though by command, and the clouds scattered and the brilliant sun of Rome kissed the picture of Rita as it was carried in triumph midst the shouts of the people. Twenty-seven years after the beatification, Monsignor Joseph Crucianai of Cascia obtained the favor through a special Bull from Alexander VII that the people of Cascia who dwelt in Rome might have their own church. And to them was granted the church of St. Blase, at the foot of the

great staircase which leads to Ara Coeli, and the church was renamed after Blessed Rita of Cascia. And this same prelate founded in that church a confraternity dedicated to the Blessed Crown of Thorns of Our Lord and to Rita of Cascia and invited the people of Saint Rita to join the organization. The Holy Father approved this society on June 12th, 1658. Shortly afterwards a large number of the faithful enrolled in this confraternity, so much so that very shortly it became one of the most powerful in Rome.

Its purpose was the devotion to the Saint, and for many years this devotion was maintained in its first fervor. But through political changes, that turned Italy into a land hostile to the Church even in Rome, there were scarcely ten who knew Saint Rita. One, however, Dominico Consolini, did dedicate his life to the restoration, not only of the Church, but likewise of the confraternity. In the meantime the Process was again taken in hand. A new investigation was made of the body and everything was done to bring about as soon as possible the solemn canonization of Rita. Monsignor Casimere

Gennari, Bishop of Conversano, had been called to Rome as assessor of the holy office, and he was a true lover of Rita of Cascia. He accepted a leadership in the confraternity. He gathered together the townspeople of Cascia who were resident in Rome. He built up once more the confraternity and he set about to make glorious the devotion to the Saint. And his works were filled with fire and his love for the Saint obtained the desired effect. This devotion was likewise observed in the Church of St. Augustine and there in the earliest days there was a chapel dedicated to the Saint. In it there are three celebrated paintings by Giacinto Brandi, representing the prayer of Saint Rita before the thorn-crowned Saviour, and on a panel on either side to the left, the bees of Saint Rita—to the right her death. But as one can readily see, the name of Rita was principally known to the members of her Order. Beyond the circle of their activity her name and story were totally forgotten and neglected.

For the beginning of the twentieth century Leo XIII had ordered once more the

Jubilee Year in the city of Rome and throughout the entire Christian world. As in centuries gone by the eyes and hearts of the faithful in every land turned toward the Eternal City; once more thousands made their way in joyful pilgrimage from far distant shores and from the neighboring lands. Once more the Jubilee Year was marked by the Solemn Canonization of Saints, and this time the lowly Sister, that four centuries and a half before had made the Roman splendor in its Jubilee her pride and her glory, was raised up from the forgetfulness of centuries and her name emblazoned on the golden lists of the Saints of the Church. The Jewel of the Order of St. Augustine was made the heritage of the whole Christian world. On Ascension Day, May 24th, before an immense throng in the great Basilica of St. Peter, John Baptist De La Salle and Rita of Cascia were proclaimed Saints by pontifical decree; the first proclaimed a model of Christian teachers, the second a model in every state of life, since her virtues had shone forth as girl and as wife, as mother, widow and nun.

This was the crowning glory that Death brought unto Rita. It was the result of long years of prayer and of intense desire on the part of the few who knew her and loved her. For the Process of Sanctification, the steps through which the heroic virtues and deeds of a life of good living are tested in the Catholic Church are many and exacting. The Church does not take into account miracles wrought during the life of her heroes and heroines; only those which in their name were worked after death are counted as proof. And how carefully and thoroughly are the facts examined! Every fact must be considered only after oath has been taken on the testimony given. Every fact is examined by doctors of unquestioned skill, and every fact excluded upon which the possibility of a doubt of the fact itself might arise. In a word, after the examination of the fact, the supernatural character of the agency through which it was operated must be clearly and indubitably shown.

I would say that the favors and the miracles which are to be attributed to our Saint

Rita are beyond counting, and that every day there are worked new and more striking wonders. There were chosen three for the solemn canonization. The first of these, which began with the very death of the Saint, has been renewed day by day as clearly as on the first day, even to our own time—four centuries and a half afterwards. The venerable word of the Holy Father has sanctioned it in most solemn manner. It is the odor that is perceived near the body of Saint Rita, especially at those times when wonders are worked through her help —an odor that is in some remarkable manner spread about.

The second miracle is the instantaneous and perfect cure of Elizabeth Bergamini of Terni. At the age of seven Elizabeth had developed a tubercular condition which deformed her entire face and blinded her in both eyes. She could not distinguish day from night. Her parents consulted the best medical men in the place, who undertook to cure the child with various remedies. They finally realized that nothing could be done to help her,

and thought best to place her under the care of the Augustinian Sisters of the Monastery in Cascia, where an aunt of the little girl was a Sister under the name of Sr. Mary Magdalen. The child was brought to the Convent in the month of May, 1833, and given over to the care of the good Sisters, who took pity on her dreadful condition and promised to care for her. They had the doctor of the Convent examine her and he confirmed the diagnosis of the medical men at Terni, to the effect that the trouble could not be cured and that the child could not regain her sight. Elizabeth suffered much; light gave her pain and they made for her two little bandages of green silk for her eyes. That she might have some rest in her sufferings, her aunt and the Mother of the Convent used to bathe her eyes according to the doctor's prescription with a lotion. But even during these moments she suffered intensely, because it was necessary to lift up the eyelids as far as it was possible, and this pained the child. Elizabeth remained in this pitiable condition till September of the same year, and in addition to the prayers that were being offered

for her by the Sisters, out of devotion to Saint Rita, they dressed her in a black habit which had been blessed by the confessor of the Sisters, and which had been touched to the coffin in which the venerable body of the Saint rests. After the child had been dressed in this habit, and after she had touched her eyes with a small silver rod that had been placed on the forehead of Rita, the Mistress of Novices observed that the pain decreased. That same morning, whilst the other Religious were occupied in the work of selecting the grains of wheat to make the little breads in honor of Saint Rita, the Mother brought Elizabeth with her to the place where they were working, and the little girl stood near one of the Sisters. She began moving the ears of wheat—not the good from the bad—but the good to the common heap. The Sister told her to keep quiet, and the Mistress of Novices gave the child a cup with some of the grains in it that she might keep her occupied. No sooner did the child receive the cup than she began herself to separate the grains with the words, "I see." And because she did not know which were the

good and which the bad, she took up a dark grain of wheat in her hand and asked whether this was to be put with the good ones or whether it was to go with the bad. She had raised the green silk; now she pulled it off and the Sisters in amazement all ran to have a look at the eyes of the little girl, which were bright and clear and thoroughly healed. And to make sure that she did gain her sight, they had her select the good grain from the bad—another cupful. This she did, and forthwith they went with her to the resting-place of Saint Rita to thank her for the great favor. And the child saw for the first time the face of the dear Saint, and she wept with all the happiness of her little heart, and with her hands stretched out, thanked Saint Rita with cries of joy. The doctor of the Convent was called, and he, under oath, declared that the Saint had performed a miracle. The child remained in the Monastery for three years more. Her eyes were always good; she learned to read and to write, to sew and to crochet.

As complement to this story of a remarkable miracle, we believe it opportune to give

here the words in which an illustrious medical man of Rome, who was called to give his judgment relative to the facts, closed his account: "As a matter of necessity, and a duty of conscience, I hereby declare that this cure was instantaneous, that it was complete and that it was lasting, that it was not brought about by medical skill, nor by the powers of nature, that it could not have been accomplished except through a miracle. This as a matter of science and as a matter of conscience must be placed amongst the deeds of might, which God in His power permits to be worked through those that love Him—the Saints—and in our case, by the Blessed Rita of Cascia. And this I testify under oath." Scarcely a word of comment is needed on a narrative so clear.

The third miracle which was admitted by the Commission that examined the cause was almost as striking, for leaving aside all technical terms, it was nothing more nor less than the lifting of a man in the agony of death from his sick-bed and his restoration to perfect health. Let us follow his story from the official record.

Cosimo Pelligrini, a tailor by trade, fifty

years of age and married, was well known in his home town, Conversano of the Province of Bari. His health gave way, his eyesight and hearing failed, and under a barbarous system of the usual home-remedies, his stomach and bowels likewise were greatly affected, and his vitality reduced by frequent cuppings and bleedings. He took to bed and dragged on from year to year a miserable existence. On May 22, 1877, he rose and heard Mass, the Mass of Saint Rita, toward whom he had always had a special devotion. After Mass he was barely able to reach home. When the physician was called in he had the wife send for the priest, and the Last Sacraments were at once administered. For two days the man lay dying; the third day the doctor gave him until sundown. On that day Pelligrini's sister-in-law, a Nun in the Convent, lighted a vigil light at Saint Rita's altar. Within the hour, the dying man opened his eyes, yawned and stretched—seemed to shake from him the sleep that held him, called his wife to his bedside with the words, "Saint Rita has cured me." He said that the Saint had appeared to him in a vision, had promised him

a perfect cure, had laid her hand upon him and then disappeared. And the following day he rose, dressed himself and was well, eyes clear, hearing excellent, digestion normal. Ten years afterwards, and Pelligrini was eighty then, a medical commission examined him once more and pronounced him in perfect health for a man of his age. The cure was practically instantaneous, it was certainly lasting, there was no plausible human explanation for the extraordinary recovery. Now it is true that these stories from the records of the examining boards of the Process seem too strange to be true, but we must remember that the Commissioners were sitting, not to approve the miracle, but to disprove it. If the testimony adduced was conclusive for those shrewd, old, practical, hard-headed Cardinals, learned in the law, and in the powers of the human mind to deceive and to be deceived, then it ought to be satisfactory to us; to me at any rate it is—and I have seen them at work.

And these miracles were the three through which death brought to Rita the title of Saint—yea, the Saint of those in desperate need!

CHAPTER VII

WHAT RITA BROUGHT TO US

SINCE her canonization on May 24, 1900, the name of Rita has been a name to conjure with. Her sweet character has become impressed on the mind and the heart of the people; and in an age when the power of prayer is denied and scoffed at, prayer to Saint Rita has been proved especially effective. In days when humility and lowliness are mistaken for weakness and degradation, her humility has been raised to the highest pinnacle of fame. One of the most wonderful things in the devotion to her has been the marvelous spread of that devotion in spite of the absence of every human help and in the face of as unreasonable opposition.

In one of his greatest encyclicals, that called "Humanum Genus," April 20, 1884, Pope Leo XIII gave a searching analysis of the position of the Church in the world in these our days. Any pronouncement from the pen of so keen a thinker would merit deep

consideration from men of all creeds; for us of the Faith his words took on a meaning more profound. His estimates, which were true then, have had their meaning placed more forcibly before us in view of world events of the last few years. The Holy Father referred to the great work of St. Augustine, "The City of God," and followed the lines that the Saint marked out. "Two loves," he quotes, "have builded two cities; the earthly, an egotistic love that reached even to the point of despising God; the heavenly city, a love of God even to the despising of one's self." These two cities, which embrace in their citizenship every one that is born into the world, diverse as they are in the longings which brought them into being, are even the more apart in the standards which they propose for their members. One, indeed, is the city of the enemies of God; the other is the City of God. In the one, the leaders are the enemies of Christ; in the other, the great leader is Christ the Lord. For the citizenship of the one the standard is the elevation of the individual above all rights and any law except that of

his own passions and desires; for the other the standard is God's holy will, to be worked out without a thought of self. The slogan of the one is Success; the watchword of the other is Service; the weapon of the one is Science without Faith or Morality; the weapon of the other Faith, with true Science and good works; the ideal of the one "Humanity" with the capital "H"; the ideal of the other the Son of Man, Christ Jesus the Lord.

And in these our days men stand aghast at that which is being done in the name of Revolution. Where shall it end? When will the fury of its uncounted might be spent? Who shall be left to witness the destruction it will work? The only question thinking men are not asking is this: Where shall it strike first? For they know. Its first onslaught is ever the same, the object of its attack does not change. That objective is the City of God, that citadel is the Church. Obedience to the law of God and of man, a respect for the life and property of men, honor to the sacredness of chastity, whether the chastity of individuals or the chastity of

married life; absolute faith in the life beyond the grave and a reliance on the justice of God: these are things against which the onrushing tide is breaking. These are things for which the City of God stands, the outposts of its tower of strength.

We know that against that tower the fury of the attack shall be spent in vain. But do we realize that these conditions are the conditions of our own day? Are we making any effort to prepare? Never before in the long history of the Church have we greater reasons for being ready than today. And as if in response to the unvoiced call, great devotions have risen in the Church. Every one of them finds its object in the Eucharistic Jesus. They center in the Blessed Sacrament. The exhortation to frequent and daily Communion, the eager care for the Seminaries and Religious institutes, the consolidating of the doctrinal forces of the Church in Catholic school life: all these things but point the way.

And amongst the modern devotions none, perhaps, has brought more straying souls near to the Tabernacle than the devotion to

Saint Rita. For from the devotion to the Blessed Sacrament her devotion has never become separated. Toward the Tabernacle Saint Rita has always pointed. From that source of all strength her clients have confidently expected help through the power of her intercession.

Not only the "younger sons that strayed," but likewise those that have remained close to the heart of the Church have known the value of the devotion to Saint Rita. For the many this devotion has brought home the meaning and power of prayer. They were in the habit of saying morning prayers and night prayers, of confession once in three months, of Mass every Sunday, of the Stations of the Cross during the Lenten time. And all at once into life came a great trial —a vital decision to be made, a cure to be obtained, a vocation to be determined, a non-Catholic friendship to be broken or to be healed by the conversion to the Church of the non-Catholic wing, an examination to be passed, a position to be obtained, false charges to be answered, a lawsuit to be won, peace to be brought back to a troubled home,

information necessary to a decision to be obtained—one of the thousand things that come into every life to show us how uncertain a certain future may become in an instant, if God so wills it. Some one suggested, perhaps, the Novena to Saint Rita, spoke of her as one who would certainly be heard before the throne of God. Both the thing and the Saint had been heard of before, perhaps. It was explained that the Novena was named after the custom of the people of Cascia to plead with Saint Rita by sending nine little girls, for nine successive visits, to the shrine of the Saint that the request be granted. Others had been helped: Saint Rita could obtain the favor, and frequently did. Then the desire was born to appeal to her. The new client prepared himself to be worthy of the favor, should it be granted: greater faith in God and His Saints, firmer hope in them and greater love for the Church and Sacraments. Confession and Communion was insisted on as an essential part of the Novena, once in the course of the nine visits, more often if possible. Nobler living, based on a greater

ST. RITA

Venerated in the Church of S. Maria del Popolo, Rome

confidence in the power of the Saint to heal and to help, was the inevitable result.

From knowing the name and power of Saint Rita there springs the natural desire to learn of her life and her work. Just to know her is to love her; humility binds us in fellowship with the truly humble; sweetness of life brings out in our own life the hidden sweetness there is in every heart; patience in suffering inspires us to suffer with patience; the power to hope when all hope seems vain is contagious. How many a wearied soul has found in Rita the Saint an ideal which they could understand; by knowing her learnt to love her, and to thank God for the gift of this knowledge and love. And so the number of Rita's clients has spread, and in that way did Saint Rita bring to the strength of the City of God the power of her prayer and the force of her example. She has become the modern advocate, and the model of Catholic living.

And this, too, in spite of an opposition that was treacherous, persistent and unfair. The immense benefit that this devotion was to bring to the men and women of

our day is measured best by the strength of the opposition against it. Those who were not its friends saw at once that it would be futile to say that the devotion would not help. Too many facts to the contrary stood in the clear white light of day to refute the assertion with a thousand voices; too many aching hearts had been comforted; too many broken lives had been mended on the great anvil of sanctified suffering. The attack then was levelled against the ever-present weakness. This is the form it took: "Saint Rita can help you, if you pray to her, but—Saint Rita has a cross for every favor." "A cross for every favor." To those that were already heavy-laden, the thought of relief only to find a heavier burden at the other side was unspeakable. Why bother at all with Saint Rita's devotion? Yet how extremely simple the reply is. And how satisfying! We know and maintain that Saint Rita has a favor for every cross, if we shall only ask her for it as we should. A thousand facts prove it, a thousand voices re-echo it, a thousand happy hearts sing it: "Saint Rita has a favor for any cross, for every cross, if

we shall do our part, our little part, in asking for that favor as we should." Our own Saint Rita, Saint of the Commonplace, has strengthened the Church in these our days by bringing to us the lesson of holy, humble, lowly living, exalted in the light of Faith. She has established herself near to our hearts, as a dear friend, in moments when every friend is dear, the advocate of those in need, the "Saint of the Impossible."

THE END

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Corcoran, Matthew J.
AUTHOR
Our Own St. Rita
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